

Medical School Has a New Dean and Town Has a New Supporter

by Natalie K. Pollock

Dr. Cato Laurencin made an appearance at a recent town council meeting to announce that the University of Connecticut has reversed itself and decided to continue providing paramedic services for Avon. He also took the opportunity to outline the accomplishments of the hospital, school and research facilities where he is currently employed.

Dr. Laurencin came to Connecticut a year ago to take on the dual positions of vice president for health affairs at the health center and dean of the school of medicine.

Dr. Mary Casey Jacob is the senior associate dean for faculty affairs at the school of medicine and a professor in the departments of psychiatry and obstetrics and gynecology. She was on the search committee and met Dr. Laurencin for the first time as a candidate.

Then she was on the transition team that prepared for his arrival and now she is one of his "academic right hands" and works with him on a daily basis.

"He is an incredibly good listener and open to ideas and feedback from others. But he is also smart and decisive and enjoys a lot of give and take," she said.

He interviewed for the job in August 2008 and was named to the post this spring. She spent the summer helping him become familiar with the institution's by-laws.

"He came with a big team of well-funded Ph.D. researchers from the University of Virginia, four or five on the faculty level and a number of post-graduate students. He is a very accomplished scientist who is not only an orthopedic surgeon but also has a Ph.D. in biochemical engineering and he has a lot of high honors in the science arena, as well as being a practicing physician," said Dr. Jacob.

She hopes that his high level of accomplishments will help the faculty become better and that he will be able to further develop the research and scientific capacities of the medical school.

"A good scientist attracts other good scientists and good grad students. So his coming will improve the quality of the school and it could affect its ranking as a university," she added.

Dr. Laurencin was acquainted with the University of Connecticut because he was asked to come to the Storrs and Farmington campuses within the last 10 years as a visiting professor.

"I have a lot of respect for the school and the hospital. There are world-famous programs here in orthopedic surgery," he said.

"I am in the stem cell institute. It was interesting to see the academic side and the medical center all working together. It's a great environment for research," he added.

He is fully aware that there are many challenges facing the complex in the immediate future, but he is excited about what he sees as opportunities.

"There's a great medical and dental school, a great research facility and world-class researchers. My long-term goal is to move the medical school to top-tier status," said Dr. Laurencin.

"We are in the mid of the mid level in the rankings, but we could be in the top tier within five years because we have the people and the programs. It will take a lot of effort and support from the state."

On the financial side, he reports that the medical complex will have its first profitable quarter in five years this quarter. In order to improve the bottom line, Dr. Laurencin believes that UConn needs a new hospital.

"A state-of-the-art health center deserves a state-of-the-art hospital. It will help us move to the vision. There will be efficiencies with a new facility," he said.

"All single rooms for privacy and infection control, and state-of-the-art equipment, could raise the quality of health care and bring financial advantages."

He is already facile with statistics about UConn's accomplishments. For example, on the education side, he reports that 85 percent of the state's medical residents are UConn graduates, as well as 60 percent of practicing dentists. At least 35 percent of physicians who graduate from UConn end up practicing in the state.

On the clinical side, more medical publications are published by UConn staff than from all other hospitals in the region combined.

"We are not just a hospital, we offer state-of-the-art health care with physicians on the cutting edge of knowledge and research and dedicated to teaching," said Dr. Laurencin.

He recently started a fund with his wife Cynthia, making a major gift to UConn in honor of his late mother, Dr. Helen I. Moorehead-Laurencin. The fund has established a fellowship for medical students who have demonstrated academic achievement and are involved in summer research projects.

They are also expected to provide mentoring to inner city high school students in the Hartford region. The first group of students will be funded this summer.

"My mother was an inspirational figure in Philadelphia. She was a primary care physician who worked out of the home. My two sisters and I were exposed to medicine at an early age," Dr. Laurencin said.

"She practiced great medicine and had a great interest in research. She also emphasized mentoring and giving back. I have been able to carry on her teachings. "

He earned his undergraduate degree in chemical engineering from Princeton University and his medical degree from Harvard Medical School, graduating magna cum laude. During medical school, he also earned his Ph.D. in biochemical engineering/biotechnology from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Dr. Laurencin's research involves tissue engineering, biomaterials science, nanotechnology and stem cell research. He is an international fellow in biomaterials science and engineering and a fellow of the American Institute for Medical and Biological Engineering.

His work was honored by Scientific American magazine as one of the 50 greatest achievements in science in 2008. Dr. Laurencin has also mentored numerous students, authored 250 publications, delivered more than 350 presentations and holds 34 patents.

He has three children: Victoria, 10, Michaela 12, and Ti, 14. The girls attend Renbrook School and his son is away at a boarding school in Virginia. Victoria has a love for animals and talks about becoming a veterinarian.

"She says, 'if that's not good, I will be a doctor.' My son is great in science and math, but he is open about a career. And my middle daughter is still deciding," he said.

Mrs. Laurencin is a stay-at-home mother and former educator. They met when she was serving as the education director for the Upward Bound program at MIT.

"My wife is open and gregarious and involved with the Renbrook School and St. Patrick's Church in Farmington and the kids. She also volunteers at a women's shelter. Raising kids is an amazing job. And my job goes from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m.," said Dr. Laurencin.

Although he does not have much leisure time, he enjoys playing golf when he can and is looking forward to exploring fishing on the Farmington river within the next few years. He has traveled around the world with the Orthopedic Society and remembers fondly a fly fishing opportunity in England.

"It is very important for me to be a doctor. I have years of training and I enjoy it," Dr. Laurencin said.

"It is also important to me to be an academic physician that understands the issues and challenges, so I see patients and I operate. Shoulders and knees are my specialty."

Dr. Jacob feels that he brings a fresh perspective to his job and the ability to make a difference. She also believes Dr. Laurencin is the kind of person who is drawn to a challenge.