

## Op-Ed Piece

A little more than six months ago, my colleagues and I moved with our families to work at the University of Connecticut Health Center. We were drawn to the institution because of its excellent reputation, and its expertise in a number of clinical and research areas.

We found a vibrant, and caring community, one whose members freely use the term "The UConn Health Center family" ... and mean it. It is a community of scholars, learners, clinicians, teachers and helping people. Here, there is a palpable zeal for scientific inquiry, engagement in high level education, and a culture focused on the pursuit of quiet excellence in patient care. I am privileged and honored to serve as its leader.

My personal journey to UConn came as a participant in a national search process. I interviewed at the institution on several occasions and marveled at the fact that such high quality, comprehensive patient care took place with an academic hospital of such small size, despite financial challenges due to the state's underfunding of its labor costs and the Health Center's public service mission.

The Health Center is unique in the region. It is the state's only public integrated academic medical center. Research, teaching, and clinical missions are not only equally cherished and "hard-wired" into everything we do, but the missions are physically adjoined through the infrastructure of the Farmington campus. The integrated academic medical center model attracts great people who seek an environment where the pursuit of these areas physically takes place in one location. It is the constant interaction between scientific discovery, patient care and education that is so vital and yes, exhilarating. The Health Center environment is reminiscent of the Harvard Medical School environment where I attended and received training. Each hospital there had extensive research facilities combined with graduate medical student and research student teaching facilities, and outstanding clinical care.

This environment is in stark contrast to the so-called "distributed model" of community based medical schools where integrated environments do not exist and teaching takes place only at community hospitals. These schools while serving the local community, are ranked among the lowest in the country in research and lack the capacity to drive innovation or regional economic growth. This would be the model in our region if the UConn-Dempsey hospital did not exist. Any consideration of such a model for this region would be a disservice to the people of our state.

We appreciate the efforts of the local community hospitals in participating in the education of UConn medical students and residents. However, make no mistake, the UConn Health Center and UConn-Dempsey hospital are the essential core, and lynch-pin to the academic mission of the region.

Connecticut understood the importance of the integrated academic medical center when it planned and funded the construction of the

Health Center almost 40 years ago. Unfortunately, like the 'bean-bag chair' of the same era, its design has proven to be problematic.

The legislature commissioned the Connecticut Academy of Science and Engineering to study the issue last year. They concluded that the UConn Health Center indeed needed a new hospital and suggested the Health Center consider a partnering route if it were to build a hospital without an excessive increase in beds. When I arrived at UConn in August, I was greeted with proposals from a CASE supervised open solicitation process involving all the hospitals in the region. All expressed interest in forming collaborations with the Health Center in one way or another. Only one proposal (a combined proposal from Hartford Health care and the Hospital of Central Connecticut) discussed a comprehensive clinical partnership with a merger of Hartford Hospital and the UConn-Dempsey hospital.

But the Hartford Hospital proposal was not just a merger proposal. It was a request by Hartford Hospital to explore its change from a community hospital focused ostensibly on clinical care and secondarily with teaching, to joining us in our quest for excellence in research, education and clinical care as a true partner. Understanding that any successful partnership starts with a shared understanding of a common vision, UConn President Michael Hogan and I spent several months in long discussions with Hartford Healthcare. This involved a certain level of soul searching. Could they embrace our culture, combining steady inquiry through research, with clinical excellence, and a core commitment to teaching?

Our conclusion was that the leadership at Hartford Hospital's commitment was genuine and could lead to transformational change for the Health Center and for the region.

The vision is to create a new University Hospital on two campuses (Farmington and Hartford) that would have 250 beds on the Farmington campus. A new faculty group, University Physicians would combine full time academically oriented physicians and dentists from UConn and Hartford Hospital and would work to attract the finest academic physicians and dentists in the country. The goal is to provide the best clinical care informed by the latest basic science, translational and clinical research that would take place in an integrated environment. Learning that builds on our already award winning programs at the undergraduate, medical student, graduate research and graduate clinical levels that constantly innovates should occur. The new UConn-Hartford Healthcare merger is designed to help transform healthcare in the region.

I hope you sense my passion for the Health Center, for its people, and for what we do. The region and the state will benefit greatly from the integrated academic health center in Farmington with its new hospital. I believe the proposed clinical partnership will help to bring clinical care, research, teaching and economic growth to new levels of excellence and vitality in the region.

Dr. Laurencin is the Vice President for Health Affairs and Dean of the School of Medicine at the University of Connecticut Health Center. His move to the University of Connecticut has been chronicled in the Journal Nature (Nature 453, 954 (11 June 2008)).