September 14, 2010

Letter from the Dean: Maintaining Positive Momentum

On Sunday, August 29, I had the privilege of welcoming more than 1,300 pediatric nephrologists to the 15th Scientific Congress of the International Pediatric Nephrology Association (IPNA) that was held in New York. I was joined in making welcoming remarks by Dr. Philip Ozuah, chair of pediatrics at Einstein and physician-in-chief of the Children’s Hospital at Montefiore (CHAM), and by Congress President Dr. Frederick Kaskel, chief of the pediatric nephrology division at Einstein and Montefiore. Among the leaders of the IPNA recognized at the congress was Dr. Ira Greifer, a pioneer in treating pediatric kidney failure, for whom the Children’s Kidney Center at CHAM is named. As I left the auditorium, greeting, among others, pediatric nephrologists from Nigeria whose travel to the congress had been generously facilitated by Phil Ozuah, I was struck by the illustrious history of pediatric nephrology at Einstein and Montefiore, and equally important, how this legacy of excellence has been maintained to date. Just this year, the Ira Greifer Children’s Kidney Center was ranked in the top 10 kidney programs of America’s best children’s hospitals.

Maintaining and building upon a history of excellence requires ongoing leadership. Three months into my fifth year as dean of Albert Einstein College of Medicine, I am proud of all we’ve accomplished — from establishing a strong administrative leadership team and filling the Michael F. Price Center/Harold and Muriel Block Research Pavilion with outstanding Einstein faculty recruits to an accelerating pace of National Institutes of Health grant awards, significant accomplishments in many fields of research and education, and a master plan leading to functional and aesthetic improvements in our campus. (I encourage you to read the upcoming issue of Einstein magazine, which will describe many of these accomplishments in greater detail.)

Despite this positive momentum, I’m mindful of the danger of taking continued progress in bringing Einstein to the highest level for granted. We certainly are not in a position to declare “mission accomplished.” While I’d like to think that we don’t need external pressures to strive for “continuous quality improvement” (more than just a trendy mantra to me), in truth, it doesn’t hurt to have some powerful reminders of why continued improvement is vital.

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Several of these “external pressures” served as the theme for my remarks at the start of orientation on August 16 for our newly arrived medical school Class of 2014. I began by asking them if they were familiar with the acronym “PPACA.” Not surprisingly, few outside the Washington Beltway knew that it stands for the “Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act” (also known as the Health Care Reform bill). However, I wanted all of our students to know that Title I of the bill calls for “quality, affordable healthcare for all Americans.” Not only does the public demand quality, it also requires affordability and sustainability, even as access is expanded to most Americans.

This requirement has major implications for how we educate our students, the future physicians who will be implementing many of PPACA’s provisions. Indeed, 2014, the year most will graduate, is the year most of PPACA’s provisions actually take effect. The only way the Health Care Reform bill can successfully lower costs, while also improving health, will be if its provisions facilitating — indeed, demanding — preventive care are successfully implemented.

Our students are fortunate in having a model of such implementation close at hand in Montefiore’s integrated care delivery system, functioning as an “Accountable Care Organization” before that term became fashionable (see http://health.usnews.com/health-news/best-hospitals/articles/2010/07/26/the-hospital-your-care-coordinator.html).

I continued my talk to the Class of 2014 pointing out the importance of ongoing research in achieving better outcomes, using breast cancer as my example — although I also could have used autism, Alzheimer’s disease, type 1 diabetes or any of dozens of other conditions for which current diagnostic, preventive and therapeutic methods are far from ideal. Citing the research of John Condeelis, Judith and Burton P. Resnick Professor of Translational Research, on how breast cancer cells metastasize, and that of Bruce Rapkin, professor of epidemiology & population health and director of the Marilyn and Stanley M. Katz Comprehensive Cancer Prevention and Control Research Program, on providing greater access to mammography screening, I explained that we need to support research across the entire spectrum — from fundamental discoveries in basic science to methods to improve healthcare access — if we are to improve outcomes for the most and least privileged members of our society.

I concluded by summarizing the competing, even conflicting demands members of the Class of 2014 would have to balance in their journeys to becoming physicians (see Figure 1):

![Figure 1](http://example.com/figure1.jpg)

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But I also assured them that if they internalized and exemplified Einstein’s core values (see Figure 2), they would surely succeed, at Einstein and beyond.

Our interactions with Einstein students, our graduate students as well as medical students, are bidirectional. We teach them, but they also teach us, continually posing questions that challenge conventional wisdom, and rejuvenating us in the process. Collectively and individually, they are one of the factors assuring that we don’t cease striving to improve. We owe as much to them.

And speaking of bidirectional interactions, our Einstein Board of Overseers, led by its chair, Dr. Ruth Gottesman, provides us support in many forms: tangible support that allows us to establish vital new research and educational programs, as well as expertise and wise counsel in facing the myriad issues confronting a large and complex institution. In return, we strive to do all we can to merit their support, keeping them informed about the latest developments in biomedical research and the healthcare arena, exposing them to our extraordinary faculty and students, and working to make Einstein the best it can be. So long as Einstein’s Board and its administrative leadership share a common vision for achieving excellence, we can appreciate our recent successes, while also continuing to move Einstein to its rightful place in the top tier of American medical schools.

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