

The View from the Top

A wide-ranging conversation with Kenneth S. Polonsky, MD, touches upon the importance of “good scientific taste,” the role of social media in marketing and the significance of the “two-crane project” well on its way in the heart of the campus



Andrew Alper, AB '80, MBA '81, (left) interviewed Kenneth S. Polonsky, MD, at a University event in March. Photo by Deborah Suchman Zeolla

By Stephen Phillips

Now several months into his tenure as dean of the Division of Biological Sciences and the Pritzker School of Medicine and executive vice president for Medical Affairs, Kenneth S. Polonsky, MD, traveled to New York City in March for an intimate conversation with alumni and friends of the University at a reception hosted by former dean Donald King, MD. Chair of the University's board of trustees Andrew Alper, AB '80, MBA '81, turned interviewer for the occasion, and Polonsky opened up about what is top of mind for him. Here are edited excerpts:

Andrew Alper: What are the biggest opportunities and challenges that you see ahead for the University of Chicago Medical Center?

Kenneth S. Polonsky: We have an exciting opportunity in translational research, that is, translating basic discoveries made at the bench into benefits for human health. The revolution in technology, with high-throughput genome sequencing, advanced imaging and sophisticated methods for

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measuring proteins and metabolites, is allowing scientists to perform rigorous research in humans. This is providing unique insights into the normal function of the human body and the biologic basis of disease. We are ideally positioned to be among the leaders in this work, thanks to our compact campus, interdisciplinary culture and expertise in computation, bioinformatics and clinical science, as well as our ability to form new cross-cutting research programs.

What keeps me up at night is not so much internal issues — our people are very able, hardworking and productive — but the external factors over which we have less control: state and federal budgets, particularly reimbursement for Medicare and Medicaid. On the other hand, I came to this country from South Africa 35 years ago, believing it to be the best place in the world to live, and nothing I have seen since has dissuaded me from that, so I have faith that as a nation we can address these issues.

Alper: What will the new Institute for Molecular Engineering mean for the biological sciences at the University?

Polonsky: I met with Matthew Tirrell, the Institute's director, upon his appointment in March, and he clearly understands the value of working closely with biological scientists. We expect to establish many opportunities for our scientists to interact and collaborate with the Institute.

Matt brings a stellar track record of building relationships with industry. This focus has the potential for substantial positive impact on the University. The new technologies the Institute will help generate will stimulate economic development for the Chicago area.

Alper: Tell us about your leadership team.

Polonsky: Sharon O’Keefe, the president of the Medical Center, is an extraordinary new leader for our hospitals. We conducted a nationwide search for a seasoned, accomplished hospital administrator, and we found the best person in Sharon. I had worked closely with her at Barnes-Jewish Hospital in St. Louis, where she was chief operating officer. She is a nurse by training and has devoted her career to improving hospital operations.

For our staff, the appointment of a nurse as president of the Medical Center was an important symbolic event, and the reception she’s received has been tremendous; there were long lines of people who wanted to shake her hand when we introduced her in February. She spent her first weeks on the job immersing herself in our operations, shadowing staff in every unit and meeting all the nurses, which also meant a lot.

One of our priorities is developing an effective faculty practice plan. This is the mechanism whereby different specialists coordinate and implement joint programs. We have great individual programs, but now we’re connecting the dots. This is especially important because our patients rarely have simple needs and often must see multiple doctors. Richard Baron is spearheading this effort. As radiology chair, he showed himself to be highly patient-centric and service-oriented, and in his new role as dean for clinical practice, he has already made substantial efforts to reach out to our faculty and to understand their concerns.

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The other person I’d mention is Conrad Gilliam, dean for research and graduate education. He is an eminent scientist and chaired our human genetics department before assuming this new role. He is leading a process to identify scientific areas where we can excel and make the biggest contribution. He has extremely good scientific taste and brings an acute understanding of the fields that are important to us.

I would also single out our dedicated and energetic marketing team under the direction of our new vice president for marketing and communications, Kathleen DeVries. We are going to be aggressive in advertising the name of the University of Chicago. And I have learned that Facebook and Twitter are not just for your kids; they are an essential part of hospital advertising. Social media are not something I am equipped to comment on, but the world is changing in dramatic ways, and I will try to facilitate the use of these new technologies to benefit our programs.

Alper: Tell us about the new hospital and what it will mean for the Medical Center.

Polonsky: The new hospital will be a launchpad for the next wave of University of Chicago contributions to medicine. It



(Left to right) Kenneth S. Polonsky, MD, Andrew Alper, and Donald King, MD. Photo by Deborah Suchman Zeolla

will empower our faculty to deliver world-class, leading-edge care to patients facing the most challenging, complex conditions and to drive new breakthrough treatments for patients.

An integrated communications system will create a feedback loop between our clinicians caring for patients and our research scientists in their labs, capturing data we can harness to push the frontiers of medical knowledge and refine medical practice. It will also support advanced surgery. State-of-the-art now requires very advanced technology for day-to-day care of patients with complex diseases. The new hospital will give us dedicated space and the infrastructure to provide this.

At the same time, we have very deliberately not committed ourselves just to current technology. The building’s design features a modular layout that can readily be repurposed to accommodate new innovations as they emerge.

We are also incorporating amenities that ensure patients and their families feel comfortable. The rooms will be private and spacious enough to allow family members to spend time with patients — including staying overnight — with facilities for them to prepare food. These are important considerations for the people we serve, many of whom face complicated procedures and extended stays.

Visually, the new hospital will be stunning. It is a magnificent structure, very imposing. I live downtown facing south, and you can see that it is the biggest structure on the South Side. When I came, I was told it was the only two-crane project in Chicago, and I think it still is.

What will set the facility apart, though, will be the presence of our brilliant, dedicated faculty. The new hospital will really light a fire under their work.

Alper: How can alumni help the Medical Center?

Polonsky: Participate! There are a wealth of opportunities via committees and events. Your input is invaluable; you know the place but have also been elsewhere, so your perspective and keen insights can help us in myriad ways. Staying engaged and letting us know what is on your mind are key. You have a vital role to play in the future of this institution. ■