A fish out
of water

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AN ACTIVIST’S HEART,  
A PRESIDENT’S DRIVE

First Pritzker grad to lead American Medical Association

In many ways, Ron Davis is your typical doctor. He discourages smoking, encourages immunizations and devotes himself to bettering people’s health.

At first glance, though, he may not seem a typical AMA president. For example, Davis turned 50 this year, which makes him at least a decade younger than most of the American Medical Association’s previous presidents. His election in June also makes him the first AMA president-elect to graduate from the University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine (1983).

But something else sets him apart: Davis is a doctor who considers whole communities his patients. As a preventive medicine physician, Davis doesn’t see individual patients, but works with clinicians, health care organizations, schools, policy-makers and others to promote health and prevent disease.

And that experience, coupled with his age and education—including a master’s degree from Chicago’s Harris School of Public Policy (1981)—brings new light to the leadership of the nation’s largest physician group, where he will take on three jobs in as many years: as president-elect, president and immediate past-president. Davis already has spent the first few months as president-elect on the road—talking with media, speaking at conferences and lobbying Congress for Medicare reform.

NOT THE AGE, BUT THE ATTITUDE

With roughly a quarter of a million members, the AMA represents less than half the 567,000 physicians and surgeons the U.S. Department of Labor estimates work in the United States. In light of the relatively low percentage, Davis views his age as an asset to the group. Aside from Davis, the leadership includes William Plstedt, MD, 70, the current president and a thoracic and cardiovascular surgeon from Brentwood, Calif., and Edward Hill, MD, 68, the immediate past-president and a family physician from Tupelo, Miss.

“It’s important to have several AMA leaders who are younger and can attract the same peer group of younger physicians,” Davis said. “I want to break the mold and show that a physician in midcareer can be president.”

That’s no meager goal considering the group’s reputation, but Davis, who lives in East Lansing, Mich., has logged a lot of experience for a “mid-career” physician. He worked for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (1984 to 1991) as director of the Office on Smoking and Health, and served as chief medical officer in the Michigan Department of Public Health (1991 to 1995). Since 1995, he has served as the Henry Ford Health System’s director for the Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention in Detroit.

Pictured at right and on next page, Ron Davis, MA ’81, MD ’83, is the American Medical Association’s newest president-elect and the first Pritzker grad to ever hold the position.
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A VITAL EDUCATION

One of the largest health care providers in the country, Henry Ford combines patient care, education and research. It consists of hospitals throughout Southeastern Michigan and serves about 70,000 patients annually. With grants from organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Davis has taken his work into community schools where he reaches out to children and teenagers about smoking, obesity and violence.

Detroit has a reputation as a relatively violent city, and Davis has worked to reduce that violence. He said that in a 1980’s study of survivors of violent trauma who were treated at Henry Ford Hospital, 20 percent died within five years of that initial visit. They tend to slide down a slippery slope of continued domestic violence, street fights and gang aggression that many accept as the norm.

“We tried early on to prevent them from going down that cascade,” Davis said. This meant bringing in speakers on gang violence, developing mentorships and teaching grade school children how to avoid violent confrontations and cope with brutality.

Davis also has worked with clinics in the Detroit area to increase immunizations rates. In 1996, only half the 2-year-olds in Detroit received the expected array of immunizations. Children would enter clinics with mild fevers and leave without acquiring needed vaccinations that many other children obtain in standard physicals, such as hepatitis, polio and measles. Some would receive only a portion of the vaccinations.

A few years later, the percentage of children with full immunizations jumped to 70. Davis attributes part of the rise to his group’s efforts to educate clinicians about those “missed opportunities.”

THE ROADS LESS TRAVELED

Davis’ passion for tackling these issues drives his career. As a student at Pritzker, he grew frustrated with the cost of treating diseases that people could prevent with lifestyle changes. That led him to preventive medicine, where he saw a chance to help people before their health got out of control.

And who better to call on for help than the country’s largest organization for physicians? Davis first joined the AMA as a second-year medical student because, he said, “I saw it as an organization where I could push ideas in these areas. That’s a major reason for my involvement in organized medicine.”

Even as a student, Davis realized the group’s potential, and apparently its members recognized his. He took an early leadership role as student chairman from 1982 to 1983 and became the first resident on the board a year later.

Davis recalls his time at Chicago fondly. “I look at my years there as the base for the rest of my career,” he said. “I was very fortunate to be able to work with some of the big figures in American medicine.”

He initially came to Chicago from Michigan with the woman who is now his wife, Nadine. The two met as undergraduates at the University of Michigan, where two of their three sons currently study. Nadine taught at Chicago’s lab school and studied political science. Davis took a year off from medical school to pursue a master’s degree in public policy studies from the Harris School.

“I thought that grounding in public policy would be helpful in my work in public health, which depends so heavily on policy development in the public and private sectors,” he said in a past interview.

Davis is a doctor who has dedicated his life to influencing others’ decisions. However, he’s adamant that he hasn’t pushed his older children, Jared and Evan, 20 and 18 respectively, both at Michigan, both on a pre-med track. “They made those choices not out of any coercion from me,” Davis said.

The only other possibility then is that he has led them by example. And if that’s any sign of his influence, then he has much to offer the AMA.