

M.D. Revives Hospital

Paul Kronenberg leads Crouse back to good health

By James T. Mulder
Staff writer

In January 2004, Crouse Hospital was in a jam.

It had just emerged from Chapter 11 bankruptcy. The temporary CEO hired to fix the Syracuse hospital's finances was leaving on short notice to take a job at a New York City hospital. Crouse had no one to take over.

Crouse's trustees were advised at a board meeting to appoint a physician to serve as interim CEO until a permanent replacement could be found.

Dr. John Fey, then a trustee, told fellow board members the only doctor suitable for the job was Paul J. Kronenberg, then chief of internal medicine at Crouse and a member of the medical staff since 1975. Kronenberg, also a trustee who was at the meeting, did not want the job. He had built up a highly successful private practice and had no interest in — or experience — running a hospital.

"I think he wanted to jump across the table and choke me," said Fey, now chief of surgery at the VA Medical Center. But other trustees agreed with Fey and turned up the pressure on Kronenberg.

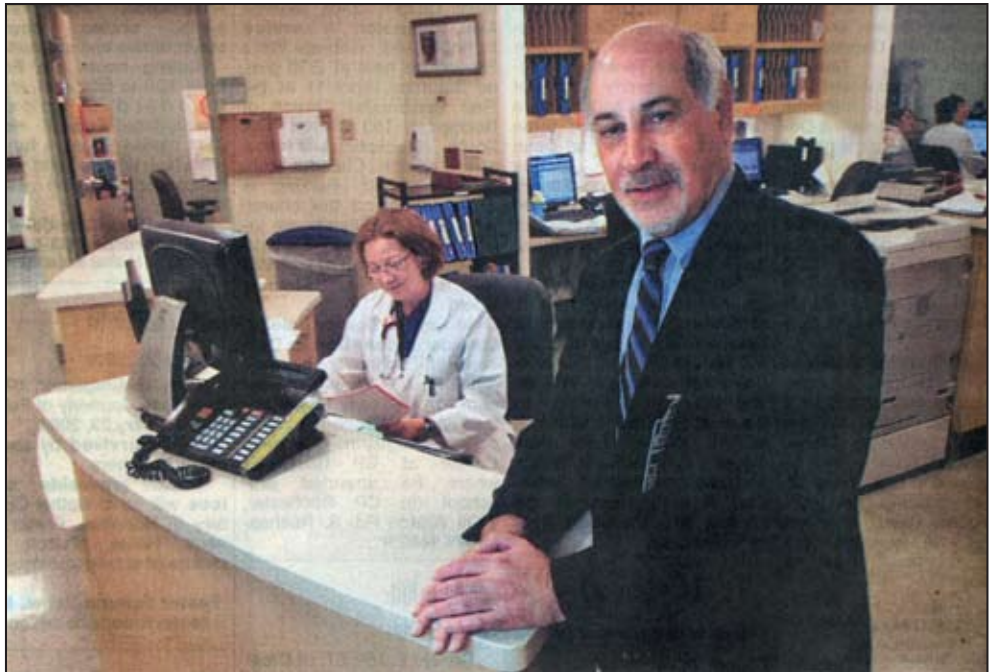
"I put him in a very untenable position of not being able to say 'no,'" Fey said. "It's kind of like if somebody is drowning. You don't have much choice but to jump in the water and save them."

That reluctant jump by Kronenberg has paid off for Crouse. Over the five years of Kronenberg's leadership, Crouse has increased patient volume, improved quality and generated healthy profits. The hospital's turnaround has earned it local and national recognition, including a Business of the Year award in 2006 from the Syracuse Chamber of Commerce and an Optimas Award for General Excellence last year from Workforce Management magazine.

From Day One, Kronenberg's philosophy has been: Do the right thing for patients, physicians and employees, and financial and operational success will follow.

"The people who were here wanted to do the right thing for patients and the organization, and as leader of the organization I gave them permission," Kronenberg said. "I gave morale a boost because they had someone they knew."

Kronenberg, 64, grew up in Flatbush, Brooklyn. His father was a physician, and, from an early age, Kronenberg wanted to follow in his footsteps.



Michelle Gabel / The Post-Standard

DR. PAUL J. KRONENBERG is the president and CEO of Crouse Hospital. Over the six years of Kronenberg's leadership, Crouse has increased patient volume, improved quality and generated healthy profits.

He did his undergraduate work at the University of Pennsylvania. While in college, he worked summers as a counselor at a children's camp in the Catskills. It was there that Kronenberg, an avid basketball fan, got to play against the late pro basketball player Wilt Chamberlain, who was in the area putting on a demonstration.

Kronenberg also met his future wife, Martha, another Brooklyn native, at the camp where she worked as a counselor.

He went to medical school at SUNY Upstate Medical University, served a brief stint in the military, then came back to Syracuse to join the faculty at Upstate before going into private practice in 1982.

He and his wife have five adult children and nine grandchildren.

A few months after signing on as Crouse's interim CEO, Kronenberg agreed to take the job permanently and continued seeing patients 2½ days a week in his practice. He gave up his practice last fall because he felt he was spreading himself too thin.

Dr. David Smith, president of Upstate Medical University, said Kronenberg has a "keen sense of the community."

Shortly after Smith joined Upstate in 2006, he and Kronenberg joined forces to fight a controversial recommendation by the state Berger Commission that called for a merger of their institutions.

"I got to see his passion and his ability analytically," Smith said. "He's a very articulate, effective and persuasive force."

Kronenberg said what he enjoys most about his role at Crouse is seeing ongoing improvement. "I get gratification out of being part of the culture that inspired that to take place," he said.

Fey said Kronenberg has always been highly respected by his peers, many of whom went to him for their own medical care. "His greatest asset is he has an uncanny ability to predict what a particular decision is going to result in," Fey said. "He can assess the collateral damage, he can assess the benefit. In the medical field, we call that the risk-benefit analysis. He's exceptionally good at that."

Fey said he has no regrets putting Kronenberg on the spot at the 2004 board meeting.

"I can't think of anything I'm prouder of than having put him in that position," he said.

James T. Mulder can be reached at jmulder@syracuse.com or 470-2245.

Dr. Paul J. Kronenberg

Age: 64.

Hometown: Fayetteville.

Summary: As president and CEO of Crouse Hospital, he has helped guide the institution out of bankruptcy and return it to profitability.

The Post-Standard Achievement Awards

What: 12 Central New Yorkers will be honored at a luncheon co-sponsored by the Syracuse Federation of Women's Clubs.