

BUSINESS LEADERS

SUNDAY CONVERSATION

'Do what's best for the patient and everything else will follow'



Dr. Seth Kronenberg is president and CEO of Crouse Hospital. Post-Standard file photo

Dr. Seth Kronenberg: *Perfection is not the goal; excellence is the goal.*

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Dr. Seth Kronenberg took over in March as president and CEO of Crouse Health amid a flurry of tough challenges: financial troubles, staffing headaches caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and a failed bid to merge with SUNY Upstate University Hospital.

Crouse has put together "a solid financial plan going forward," said Kronenberg, 51, of Manlius. He credits the hospital's strong corporate culture — a family atmosphere that values each individual's contribution — for recent improvements in retention and recruiting.

If Kronenberg's name sounds familiar, it should. His father, Dr. Paul Kronenberg, was Crouse's president and CEO from 2004 to 2014.

Seth Kronenberg dreamed of being a doctor, not an administrator. He grew up in Central New York, graduated from the University of Pennsylvania and Upstate Medical University. Kronenberg was practicing internal medicine when an opportunity arose to become the chief medical officer and, later, chief operating officer.

Tell me a bit about your journey to your current role.

My whole life, as long as I can remember, I intended to be a doctor. Over the course of time, opportunities presented themselves for management and leadership roles in places where I thought I could add value. At some point, I was doing full-time administration and still full-time seeing patients and I needed to make a decision. And it's been great.

You're in a job that your father, Dr. Paul Kronenberg, held. What's it like to follow in his footsteps?

It's great. He's a great resource. He's taught me a lot over the years, and it's been great having someone to be able to role model.

Are there parts of the way he did the job you are trying to replicate?

I learned a long time ago that I have to be myself. But certainly there are things that I've learned from him. Probably the most critical is: Do what's best for the patient and everything else will follow.

The healthcare industry is always in flux. How do you decide which fire to put out first?

We're very mission-driven here to provide the best in patient care and promote community health. The challenge becomes, then, that everything is important to drive that mission. That's why it's so important to have a great team. We're very fortunate here we have the best culture of any institution in the area.

How is the hospital doing financially?

We have a solid financial plan going forward. Coming off the merger discussions, coming out of COVID has really generated a lot of positive energy in the institution. COVID was difficult for everyone, and certainly in healthcare, it was difficult. So it's so rewarding to see all this positive energy and optimism going forward.

Tell me more about company culture.

It was built over 150 years of having the best medical staff, the best employees and caring for each other. It's really that family environment. People feel that culture at new employee orientation. And it really is our greatest resource. Enhancing the culture is one of my primary responsibilities as a CEO and I take that very seriously.

... And one of the other important things is having fun at work. Healthcare is so challenging that (it helps if you) enjoy coming to work and enjoy having fun with the peo-

ple here. That's what makes it worthwhile.

How do you have fun in a setting where it's life and death all the time?

It's serious business. But you have to enjoy each other. We do things like plate smashing and carnivals. We've had food trucks and ice cream trucks. It's enjoying each other's company and having fun as personal relationships in a very serious business.

TV shows often portray bad behavior in the health-care environment. Is that true to life?

The patient experience is a very important initiative for us. When we say, "every moment matters," that's every encounter between nurses and docs, environmental services and patients. So we value our environmental service workers the same as our physicians and our nurses. That helps drive the culture and breaks down some of the barriers you're describing.

Can you think of a time when you were tested and how you handled it?

COVID was something that none of us had any training for. One of the things that we feel very strongly about is open communication and getting everybody's input. During COVID, change was so rapid, that that was challenged. It was our culture that carried us through. Healthcare doesn't move quickly, and we had to during COVID. And while it was challenging, those skills will now serve us well going forward.

If you could go back and give some advice to your younger self, what would it be?

One of the important lessons would be the value of leadership skills, even as a practicing doc. When I went to medical school, we didn't learn about leadership skills, the importance of cultures and institutions, and business and management skills. When we meet with younger physicians or even younger students, (I tell them that) career paths aren't linear. We're all informal leaders with or without title, and skills in how to lead, how to manage your business, are all critical.

Any tips for aspiring leaders?

Knowing yourself and being yourself are very important. Knowing your blind spots and weaknesses. Understanding that perfection is not the goal; excellence is the goal. "I don't know but I'll find out" is a great answer. The other thing that's important is you have to believe in the mission. So find something you love and that you really believe in. And then you'll have unlimited opportunities.

What is Central New York's greatest unmet challenge from where you sit?

We still have significant health disparities in the area. We're also still in an opioid epidemic. We have plenty of opportunities as a community to improve healthcare for everyone, and certainly combat the opioid epidemic.

What is Crouse doing about it?

We are the leaders in addiction treatment services, so we have an outpatient facility and an inpatient facility, and we're working very aggressively with our healthcare partners and those in the community on education on the risks of opioid use and the risk of overdose and treatment options.

What is our community's greatest asset?

The people are tremendous asset to the community. It's an incredible place to live. When people come in from the outside, they're blown away by what Central New York has to offer. And I think we're seeing more and more the appreciation of our community, what makes Central New York special.