

Healthy Prosperity

**An Interview with Michael J. Dowling,
President and Chief Executive Officer, North Shore-LIJ Health System**



Michael J. Dowling

EDITORS' NOTE Before assuming his current role in 2002, Michael Dowling was the health system's Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer. Before joining North Shore-LIJ in 1995, he was a Senior Vice President at Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield. Dowling served in New York State government for 12 years, including seven years as State Director of Health, Education and Human Services and Deputy Secretary to former Governor Mario Cuomo. He was also Commissioner of the New York State Department of Social Services. Before entering public service, Dowling was a professor of social policy and Assistant Dean at the Fordham University Graduate School of Social Service, and director of the Fordham campus in Westchester County. Dowling, who grew up in Ireland, earned his undergraduate degree from University College Cork (UCC), Ireland, and his master's degree from Fordham University. He also has honorary doctorates from Hofstra University and Dowling College.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF With 15 hospitals, more than 9,000 physicians, 10,000 nurses, and a total workforce of more than 42,000, North Shore-LIJ is the largest integrated health care network in the New York region and the second-largest, nonprofit health system in the nation. Its facilities include four major teaching hospitals (North Shore University Hospital, LIJ Medical Center, Lenox Hill Hospital, and Staten Island University Hospital) and two specialty centers nationally renowned for their pediatric and psychiatric care – Cohen Children's Medical Center of New York and The Zucker Hillside Hospital. In addition to world-class clinical care that helped earn it the National Quality Forum's 2010 National Quality Healthcare Award, North Shore-LIJ conducts pioneering research at The Feinstein Institute for Medical Research, enrolling more than 1,200 people every year in clinical research studies. The health system also offers a visionary approach to medical education, highlighted by the Hofstra North Shore-LIJ School of Medicine. Even before the new medical school admits its first class in August 2011, there are already more than 1,200 medical student rotations throughout the North Shore-LIJ Health System. In addition, the health system's 110 residency and fellowship programs serve as a training ground for more than 1,400 future physicians, many of whom hone their skills at North Shore-LIJ's Patient Safety Institute – the nation's largest patient simulation center.

To what do you attribute the significant growth that the North Shore-LIJ Health System has been experiencing?

When the North Shore-LIJ Health System was created in 1997, we made a commitment to become an innovative organization focused on quality. Our overarching focus on delivering high-quality health care has enabled us to develop a growing reputation for clinical excellence throughout the health care industry, which attracts other providers – including both individuals and facilities – with a similar sense of mission. When new hospitals join the North Shore-LIJ Health System, we make investments to improve the quality of care. As a result of our approach, we've developed a fully integrated network of hospitals across the New York metropolitan area, enabling us to continually increase market share.

Will you talk about how you've been able to retain such a strong culture despite all the growth?

We have a defined set of values, behaviors, and expectations that are central to everything we do as an organization – excellence, teamwork, integrity, caring, innovation, customer focus, and collaboration. We also share information in an atmosphere of total transparency. Our employees have a very clear understanding of our mission and what we expect from them. As a result, we've been able to build on a culture that's focused on doing what's right for patients and their families. Of course, a big part of it is making sure we put the right people in the right jobs. I meet each new employee who is hired at every level, because leadership occurs at all levels of the organization and you want leaders at every level of the organization.

How important is diversity and inclusion to the culture of North Shore-LIJ?

The New York area is one of the most diverse places in the country. Queens, for example, which is home to many of our facilities, is one of the most diverse communities in the world, encompassing more than 140 different nationalities, cultures, and religions.

If we're not attentive to the specific cultural needs of the individuals who come to us for care, we're not going to be successful. Similarly, the patients we serve mirror the cultures of the employees we hire – you need diversity at all levels.

In light of the growth and your size, how are you able to remain innovative?

Innovation is one of our core values. If you don't constantly innovate, you become obsolete. For health care organizations to succeed, it's crucial that they embrace change and find new, better ways to improve the quality of care. That's why I established a corporate university called the Center for Learning and Innovation – to help us remain at the cutting edge of innovation and employee development.

Also, we have a very robust process of getting ideas from frontline employees about how we can help them do their jobs better and more efficiently. Every six weeks, we receive reports from groups of employees involved in projects to break down barriers to change and identify solutions to long-standing operational problems.

If we aren't constantly thinking about new ways of doing things, we will never be able to remain a leader in the future. We keep this alive by making it part of what we do on an ongoing basis.

Are you concerned that young people are no longer as interested in entering the medical profession?

I see the very opposite. I see great talent wanting to come into health care. The thing that we have to make sure of as an organization is that we find motivated, passionate people. That's why we have large lists of high-potential employees who we identify every year; we recruited and hired nearly all of our leaders and we know who their successors are going to be. To maintain a vibrant workforce, we bring in young people through an administrative fellowship program every year, in addition to about 80 new employees who we hire every week, most of whom are young, up-and-coming clinicians and professionals.

We constantly strive to understand how we communicate with and excite generations of individuals who might think differently than baby boomers like me.

I want people to enjoy coming to work, because most people spend the majority of their lives with the people they work with. If not, they won't be productive. And there is a direct correlation between a highly motivated, satisfied workforce and good patient care. ●