

# The Future of Healthcare

An Interview with Kenneth L. Davis, MD, Chief Executive Officer, Mount Sinai Health System

**EDITORS' NOTE** Dr. Kenneth Davis attended the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai and completed a residency and fellowship in psychiatry and pharmacology, respectively, at Stanford University Medical Center. Upon returning to Mount Sinai, he became Chief of Psychiatry at the Mount Sinai-affiliated Bronx Veterans Administration Medical Center and launched Mount Sinai's research program in the biology of schizophrenia and Alzheimer's disease therapeutics. Davis was appointed CEO of Mount Sinai Medical Center in 2003 after spending 15 years as Chair of Mount Sinai's Department of Psychiatry. He was the first director for many of the institution's research entities and received one of the first and largest program project grants for Alzheimer's disease research from the National Institutes of Health. Davis also served as Dean of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai from 2003 to 2007 and as President of the American College of Neuropsychopharmacology in 2006. In 2002, he was elected to the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences, and in 2009 his undergraduate alma mater, Yale University, presented him with the George H. W. Bush '48 Lifetime of Leadership Award.



Kenneth L. Davis

## What have been the keys to Mount Sinai Health System's strength and leadership in the industry?

It starts with our people. We need people who are committed to each other more than they are committed to themselves, who see the higher good, who put their ambition in second place, and who feel that Mount Sinai has been a part of them for a very long time. This is why we generally promote from within as we know the importance of having people who have grown up inside

the system. I am a prototype of that having spent all but six years of my career here. My first encounter with Mount Sinai was when I was a patient at the age of seven and it is also the place where the rest of my family received care. This focus brings a bigger commitment to always do what is best for the institution and, in turn, what is best for our patients.

## Has it been challenging to maintain culture as Mount Sinai has grown in size and scale?

It is critical to maintain culture and it is very difficult. When we have taken over other hospitals, we have tried to bring our culture into those hospitals. Many times, this may cause some people to leave or seek other opportunities if they do not feel comfortable and we support their decision. Culture is at the heart of any organization, and it is our priority to have people who understand our culture, believe in our culture, and want to be a part of our culture.

## How proud are you to see the strength and resilience of your workforce in addressing the challenges caused by the pandemic?

The challenges have been so great on a day-to-day basis and I am proud of what we accomplished and how we adapted to address the pandemic. For instance, at this very moment, we have a 350-nurse staffing shortage and another 150 nurses are out with a healthcare disability which is primarily COVID, so this puts us 500 nurses down today. We all cope, and our people step up and fill the void without complaining or making excuses. Our people rose to the challenge and know that this is necessary when you choose this career. The hardest part is that while they all chose healthcare as a career and knew that they would be at the bedside taking care of patients and were committed to

servicing patients, they never signed on to putting their lives on the line which is what happened with COVID. Our team's lives were in jeopardy on a daily basis since COVID is so transmissible. Before vaccination was available, we tragically lost a few of our staff to this deadly virus.

We created the Center for Stress, Resilience and Personal Growth to respond to the emotional and mental health needs of our people who were on the front lines of this fight. Our commitment to supporting and taking care of our people is at the heart of our culture.

## Will you discuss the importance for healthcare leaders, and the industry more broadly, to focus on lessons learned from the pandemic in order to be better prepared for future crises?

Every Wednesday, I have a conference call with the CEOs of the major health systems in New York during which we share our challenges and our solutions. It has been very useful to hear how each of our institutions copes with similar problems and issues. We focus on what is around the corner and what we will need to address going forward which is critical to most effectively addressing future challenges.

## What do you see as the role of the hospital in the future and has the pandemic impacted the focus on the number of beds required or the most appropriate size of a hospital?

This is the paradox. We know that the long-term outlook for hospitals is that care is becoming more ambulatory because of advances in medicine. However, when COVID hit, it was all about the need for more beds in the hospital to care for patients. This has shown us that we must have the capacity to rapidly expand in case of another pandemic. In Mount Sinai's case, for one of our facilities, Beth Israel Hospital, we decided to make the site the best option for protecting us from surges, so we concluded that rather than constructing a micro-hospital for this facility, to modernize Beth Israel and keep extra units in storage so, should we face other variants or other viruses, we are ready.

## Are you concerned about the ability for the industry to attract and retain the talent needed to address the future challenges in healthcare?

Medical students approaching a career in medicine tell me how proud they are about how this industry stepped up during a

**INSTITUTION BRIEF** Mount Sinai Health System ([mountsinai.org](http://mountsinai.org)) encompasses the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai and eight hospitals, as well as a large and expanding ambulatory care network. The eight hospitals – Mount Sinai Beth Israel, Mount Sinai Brooklyn, The Mount Sinai Hospital, Mount Sinai Queens, Mount Sinai St. Luke's, Mount Sinai South Nassau, Mount Sinai West, and New York Eye and Ear Infirmary of Mount Sinai – have a vast geographic footprint throughout the New York metropolitan region. The Mount Sinai Hospital is ranked number 14 in the nation by U.S. News & World Report and ranked in the top 20 nationally in eight medical specialties in the 2019-20 "Best Hospitals" guidebook. The New York Eye and Ear Infirmary of Mount Sinai is also ranked nationally in ophthalmology.

The Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai opened in 1968 and has more than 6,500 faculty members in 34 academic departments and 39 clinical and research institutes. A renowned medical school and graduate school, it is ranked number four in the nation among medical schools for overall research funding per principal investigator.

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difficult time and how committed they are to serving patients. They want a career that is meaningful and gives them purpose. As difficult as the past 18 months have been for the profession, I believe that it has reinforced for young people going into the industry the meaning and purpose that medicine offers as a career.

**How critical is it for medical schools to evolve their curriculums to address the future of medicine?**

The best medical schools are aligned with the best hospitals. If you are not on the cutting-edge of providing next generation medicines and therapeutics, you will not be teaching your medical school students for the future and preparing them for what is next in health-care. You can evaluate medical schools by the quality and depth of the partnership they have with a hospital. Since we are one of the rare places where a hospital gave birth to a medical school, rather than where a university had a medical school and tried to find an affiliation with a hospital, we integrate exploration of next generation care and learning for the future as part of the curriculum.

**Will you discuss Mount Sinai Health System’s commitment to building a diverse and inclusive workforce?**

This is a priority for us. It is a fact that if the healthcare provider is of the same nationality or speaks the same language as the patient, that patient is much more likely to comply with the care, and compliance is critical to a positive outcome. We need a medical school and a healthcare workforce that reflects the diversity of the communities we serve. This is not easy to do and it has been most difficult to attract Black males to the industry. We are providing scholarships and proactive programs in college to identify Black males that may have an interest in joining the profession and becoming physicians, but it has been challenging and we need to continue to do the best we can to make strides in this effort.

**What do you see as the role that leading health systems have in being engaged in the communities they serve?**

The determinants of health outcomes are largely socio-demographic – whether you are employed, what you eat, the quality of where you live. We have to be engaged in all of these areas in order to get the best outcomes. It is our role to ask questions, to provide information, and



*Part of the Mount Sinai campus in Manhattan's Upper West Side*

to be a part of the community in order to be most effective and provide the best care.

**Mount Sinai Health System places a major focus on the hospitality part of healthcare and the patient experience. Will you highlight the importance of having a service mentality?**

This is critical, and we have to remember that when you are running a hospital, you are also running a big hotel. For Mount Sinai Health System, that consists of eight hotels and a number of ambulatory hotels where patients stay briefly. New York City has three of the top twenty hospitals in the country, so it comes down to how you treat the patient. Being more gracious and kinder starts with the security guard as a person enters the hospital and continues with every person that patient will come into contact with during their stay. Hospitality and a service mentality are critical to the success of a hospital.

**When you lead an institution that is constantly focused on being prepared to address unforeseen challenges and crises, is it difficult to take moments to appreciate and celebrate all the achievements that happen at Mount Sinai Health System on a daily basis?**

I should be able to do this, but it is very difficult. Someone once said, “Your team has done a great job.” I remember thinking about what it takes for someone to use an adjective like “great” with me since it is not the way I think. I am always focusing on what is next and continuous improvement. It is just not who I am to focus on past accomplishments. However, it is hard to put into words how thankful and proud I am to lead an institution like Mount Sinai Health System and to be a part of a team that is so committed to taking care of patients and improving communities. ●