

# Active Transformation

An Interview with Philip O. Ozuah, MD, PhD, President and Chief Executive Officer, Montefiore Medicine

**EDITORS' NOTE** Dr. Philip Ozuah is the President and CEO of Montefiore Medicine, the umbrella organization for Montefiore Health System and Albert Einstein College of Medicine. A nationally recognized physician, leader, executive, researcher, teacher and author, Dr. Ozuah previously served as President of Montefiore Health System. A National Institutes of Health (NIH) funded researcher and award-winning educator, he also served as Professor and University Chairman of Pediatrics at Albert Einstein College of Medicine and Physician-in-Chief of the Children's Hospital at Montefiore. Dr. Ozuah has been recognized locally and nationally for excellence in teaching and patient care, including as an inductee into the Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society and a two-time recipient of the Academic Pediatric Association's prestigious Helfer Award for Innovation in Medical Education. Along with his various awards for teaching and clinical excellence, Dr. Ozuah has also been recognized by Modern Healthcare as one of the "Top 25 COOs in Healthcare." Dr. Ozuah earned his medical degree from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, a master's degree in education from the University of Southern California and a PhD in educational leadership and administration from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He completed his Pediatric Internship and Residency at Albert Einstein College of Medicine and Montefiore, and his Post-Doctoral Fellowship in Medical Education at the University of Southern California School of Medicine.



Philip O. Ozuah

**Montefiore is a purpose-driven organization with a long history of supporting its employees, patients and communities. How did Montefiore adapt the way it works as it fought the global pandemic?**

It all starts with our staff. I am most proud of, and humbled by, the extraordinary courage that they displayed in the face of the deadliest public health crisis in more than 100 years. Confronted by an unprecedented emergency, they responded with dedication and innovation, transforming the way we operated

practically overnight. Everyone had to be flexible to meet the demand – the pace was relentless around the clock. They treated thousands of patients under extraordinary pressure and saved thousands of lives. In that effort, which continues to this day, they demonstrated their total commitment to our patients and the communities we serve – our neighbors. That service came at a

terrible cost – we lost 30 of our dear colleagues to COVID. It is my good fortune to lead such brave and dedicated people. The men and women of Montefiore embody the highest of ideals – the selfless care of those in need – and I am honored by the trust they place in me.

**Montefiore was built with an entrepreneurial spirit and an ability to be nimble and adapt. How critical was it to be able to adapt and change course quickly in order to meet the challenges of the pandemic?**

It was, as they say, the whole ballgame. We went from two COVID patients on March 11, 2020 to more than 2,000 barely two weeks later. You can't meet that kind of demand unless flexibility and imagination are baked into your culture, and we were as ready as any team could have been. At Montefiore, we are constantly working to improve the way we do things at every level of the institution. We also value open and honest communication which is crucial in times of crisis. We were all in it together and I kept everyone in

**INSTITUTION BRIEF** Montefiore Medicine ([montefiore.org](http://montefiore.org)) is the umbrella organization overseeing both Montefiore Health System and Albert Einstein College of Medicine. Montefiore Health System is comprised of 11 hospitals, including the Children's Hospital at Montefiore and Burke Rehabilitation Hospital, employs nearly 40,000 people, and has nearly 8 million patient interactions a year throughout four New York counties: the Bronx, Westchester, Rockland and Orange. In addition, Montefiore recently ranked among the top 1 percent of hospitals in seven specialties by U.S. News & World Report. For more than 100 years, Montefiore has been nationally recognized for innovating new treatments, procedures and approaches to patient care, producing stellar outcomes and raising the bar for health systems around the country and around the world.



The Children's Hospital at Montefiore (CHAM) at Montefiore Hospital Moses Campus in the Bronx

**“All hospitals, especially those that serve communities with large minority populations, should work to demystify healthcare. They need to actively reach out to their neighbors, open up lines of communication and position themselves not as a last resort in the case of a medical emergency, but as a welcoming community resource for health information, preventive care and more.”**

the loop with near daily e-mails, town halls and virtual calls. I shared details about the challenges we faced and the steps we were taking to meet them, and I listened to the staff about their needs and concerns.

There were moments, of course, when I had to go it alone as CEO. There came a time in April 2020, for example, when we only had a one-day supply of N-95 masks left. My senior management team recommended that we start to ration them, to save some, because if we ran out, we couldn't render care. We were working hard to get more, of course, but they hadn't come in. I made the decision to hand out all the masks without any guarantee that we were going to get more. I said to the team, and myself, that we have to protect our people today, right now, and protect them maximally – we'll figure the rest out tomorrow. That was a lonely moment because I had to make that call alone. As it happened, we managed to get a handful of masks a day later, and then another handful, so we got through that crisis.

**What do you see as the biggest challenges facing leading health systems and hospitals as you look to the future?**

There is the ongoing challenge to ensure that our patients have the best possible experience and the best possible outcomes while under our care. There is the challenge to advance medical science and develop new and effective treatments and protocols. There are also the financial challenges that every institution must meet to remain viable. The challenge that looms largest, the one we can no longer ignore, is to eliminate the racial and social inequities that the coronavirus has exposed. It's not enough to save desperate people during a pandemic. We must meet the everyday needs of the overlooked, underserved and vulnerable populations who have borne the brunt of COVID. To start, we must find ways to include them in the life of our institutions. At the hospital and medical school leadership level, where I operate, there are multiple ways to advance this cause. Hiring practices play a critical role, and so do the ways that hospitals present themselves to the communities they serve. A hospital can be a scary, intimidating place, and major urban medical centers can be the scariest of all. All hospitals, especially those that serve communities with large minority populations, should work to demystify healthcare. They need to actively reach out to their neighbors, open up lines of communication and



*Montefiore Hospital Moses Campus in the Bronx*

position themselves not as a last resort in the case of a medical emergency, but as a welcoming community resource for health information, preventive care and more. Hospital leadership should also form partnerships with local leaders and institutions, including police departments, elected officials, and social service and religious organizations, to create programs that promote community health.

**What is your vision for the evolving role of the hospital as health systems grow their ambulatory care and outpatient facilities?**

Every change we make at Montefiore, every new idea or strategy we implement, must improve patient care and outcomes. Ours is a culture of innovation and a history of firsts including, for example, the first cardiac pacemaker. We value that heritage and are committed to building on it. We are always looking for new ways to serve our patients and our communities, new ways to do things better. We are currently in a period of active transformation. We've grown very rapidly over the last decade and we've begun a process of integrating all of our values across the system – our 11 hospitals, our medical school and our

vast primary and specialty care network. As we look at our business model and work on creating an even stronger, more sustainable enterprise, we're incorporating the many lessons we learned while meeting the challenges that COVID brought. Among them is the high value of agility and adaptability, regardless of the size of the institution, the complexity of the mission or the novelty of the crisis.

**There is a great deal of discussion about New York's future. In leading an institution like Montefiore with such a long and storied history in New York, are you optimistic that New York will recover and rebuild in order to remain a leading global city?**

New York City was the epicenter of the pandemic in those first brutal weeks and months. In a single day – April 7, 2020 – it suffered 806 deaths from COVID. By August of this year, the city had recorded more than a million cases, with 33,661 deaths. But even in the darkest days, I never doubted the resilience of New Yorkers. I saw firsthand how tough and determined they can be. Confronted by an unknown enemy with lethal power, we came together, united by a fighting spirit, and did what we had to do. The



*The new, state-of-the-art Montefiore Hutchinson Campus raises the bar for efficiency and innovation in healthcare*

city shut down, but it's people never did. They never flinched. I am confident that New York City will continue as a world leader in science, medicine, finance, arts and the many other realms that make it so special.

**What do you see as the keys to New York City's recovery and how critical is it for there to be a strong public/private partnership working together to secure New York's future?**

The same spirit of collaboration that helped us get through the worst of the pandemic is the key to future success. Early in the fight against COVID, for example, the CEOs of the five major New York health systems came together as a team. We shared information, equipment and other resources and even moved patients around to assure them the best possible care. New York has a strong tradition of public/private partnerships. At Montefiore, we work with city and state agencies on a daily basis to ensure better access and more equitable health outcomes in the communities we serve. We have multiple corporate partnerships and we do a lot of work with community-based organizations to foster the growth of innovative programs that promote the health and wellness of New Yorkers. A current priority for Montefiore and our partners is sharing information about vaccine safety and encouraging New Yorkers to get vaccinated.

**What do you see as the role that business and the private sector can play as a force for good in society by bringing its talent, expertise and resources to help address global crises?**

COVID-19 brought out the best in Montefiore and countless other institutions and organizations as we rose to the occasion in a once-in-a-century crisis. We learned a lot about

meeting unprecedented challenges with the resources at hand and that's obviously a good thing. Looking ahead, my hope is that as we continue to plan for the worst, we go beyond crisis management and help the communities we serve succeed and thrive on an everyday basis. One way to do that is by growing the workforce, providing training and job opportunities to local residents. Montefiore is the largest employer in the Bronx. We have an array of programs to recruit new employees and help our current staff members advance, including a special program designed to broaden the pool of minority and disadvantaged students who can go on to careers in medicine and science. In the same spirit, I serve on the New York Jobs CEO Council, a coalition of CEOs from 27 major companies, that is committed to helping 100,000 minority and low-income New Yorkers secure entry-level career path jobs by 2030.

**Montefiore is deeply engaged in the communities it serves. Will you discuss Montefiore's commitment to community and population health?**

When our neighbors come through our doors, they receive the finest medical care available anywhere in the world. We treat every person who shows up, regardless of their circumstances, and we treat them all with the same respect and standard of care. I find it maddening to think that individuals who live within mere blocks of my hospital are made more vulnerable by their physical and social environments. I'm a doctor – I can handle COVID and other diseases when they appear, but I want to help people before they need medical care. In order to do that, I need partners to address the long-term issues that over time create the health disparities that so impact minorities and the poor, things like

crowded and substandard housing, inadequate schools, food deserts and the lack of safe outdoor space. This is why we have created a roster of community-based programs at Montefiore that directly impact our neighbors. These include working with local bodegas in areas with high rates of diabetes to improve the availability of healthy food choices in a culturally relevant way. Also, in coordination with the New York City Housing Authority, we promote asthma education and improved cleaning and pest control in city housing projects. We teamed up with BronxWorks, the Bronx's largest social service provider, to hold a Poverty Simulation to help our clinical and social staff better understand the lives of their patients and clients, and alert them to any unconscious biases in their interaction with the people they serve.

I believe that healthcare providers have a special responsibility to be advocates for public health. We can see the big picture. We are uniquely positioned to identify the many different factors that negatively affect the health of the communities we serve.

**How critical is it for medical schools to transform their curriculum in order to best prepare the future leaders in medicine?**

As healthcare providers, we have a moral obligation to build and maintain a culture that embraces equality, respect, dignity and inclusivity at every level of the institution. At the same time, we must be rigorous in our pursuit of excellence if we are to deliver the best possible care and assure our patients of the best possible outcomes. These principles define Albert Einstein College of Medicine, which is part of the Montefiore system. Like the rest of Montefiore, Einstein's students and staff reflect the diversity of the communities they serve and the communities they come from. At Einstein, our students learn that medicine is an instrument of social justice and it is their responsibility to see that justice is done. They are taught to deliver equitable and culturally competent care while meeting the highest professional standards. They must not only know what to do and how to do it, they must know who they are doing it for. As the legendary Canadian physician Sir William Osler famously said, "The good physician treats the disease, the great physician treats the patient who has the disease." For young doctors in this era of advanced technology and subspecialties, those words ring truer than ever.

**What advice do you offer young people interested in a career in medicine?**

I don't know of a field that is more stressful than medicine. Your patients will literally place their lives in your hands. You will do everything possible to help them, and sometimes it may not be enough. I also don't know of a field that is more rewarding than medicine. Your patients will literally place their lives in your hands, and you will succeed and they will get better. Medicine is definitely not for everyone, but if it turns out to be right for you, you will make a difference every day and there will be a little less pain and suffering in the world. ●