

A Culture of Interaction

An Interview with Margaret Pastuszko, President and Chief Operating Officer, Mount Sinai Health System

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to her current role, Margaret Pastuszko served as Executive Vice President, Chief Operating Officer and Chief Strategy Officer where she led Mount Sinai's commitment to performance and process improvement and the identification of opportunities for investment and resource optimization. She began her career at Mount Sinai in 2001 as Associate Dean of Operations for the Mount Sinai School of Medicine and then transitioned to the role of Vice President for Business Planning at The Mount Sinai Medical Center. Before joining Mount Sinai, she served as a Divisional Administrator and Practice Manager of Internal Medicine at Temple University Hospital. She also worked as a consultant with APM Management Consultants and, later, with CSC Healthcare. Pastuszko earned a bachelor's degree in economics with a concentration in multinational management and international finance and an MBA with a major in healthcare management and economics from The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.



Margaret Pastuszko

INSTITUTION BRIEFS Mount Sinai Health System (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 #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 #4 in the nation among medical schools for overall research funding per principal investigator.

What have been the keys to the strength and leadership of Mount Sinai Health System?

Mount Sinai started as a small institution of one hospital with a medical school and it created an intimate environment. It has been important as we have continued to grow to maintain that familiarity and closeness and we have done this very well. We have a culture that is committed to innovation which sparks curiosity and openness to ideas with a focus on putting others ahead of ourselves. We have collaboration,

teamwork and inclusivity which builds a culture of interaction. It has been a huge advantage as we have developed the health system that the hospital and the medical school grew up together with goals that are aligned.

Will you discuss your new role as President and Chief Operating Officer of Mount Sinai Health System?

This role has been a change in the structure of the organization and provides the opportunity for me to fill a gap that existed in creating an integrated system. The role was a natural evolution based on how the health system has evolved from one hospital with a medical

school to many hospitals and practices and locations with thousands of employees. I am thrilled to have the opportunity to advance the mission of Mount Sinai Health System and to work with a team of exceptionally talented people.

My focus is on advocating for our team members, advancing the mission and vision for Mount Sinai, and driving continuous innovation throughout the health system. I have been a part of the fabric of the organization for many years which has made this a smooth and seamless transition.

Will you highlight Mount Sinai's evolution to an integrated system?

I think that the most important thing for a successful integration of a health system is actually listening and not assuming you have all the answers. It is about collaboration and bringing people together and advancing the goals. The beauty about healthcare is that our goals are all the same with a focus on providing the best care. It is my priority to put the patient first and it is amazing to see that when you focus on putting the patient first, disagreements tend to leave the table.

How critical is it for Mount Sinai Health System's workforce to mirror the diversity of the patients and communities it serves?

"I think that the most important thing for a successful integration of a health system is actually listening and not assuming you have all the answers. It is about collaboration and bringing people together and advancing the goals."

“We have a culture that is committed to innovation which sparks curiosity and openness to ideas with a focus on putting others ahead of ourselves. We have collaboration, teamwork and inclusivity which builds a culture of interaction.”

This is critically important and we hire people from the communities we serve so that the alignment is there and there is no separation between our workforce and our patients. Our workforce has an appreciation and understanding of the issues that our patients are facing. Healthcare is not a transaction – it is a lifetime commitment. Our focus is not about a patient walking into one of our hospitals and then walking out a few days later. This is one piece of success, but our emphasis is on the continuum of care that they can get throughout their lives. The only way to do this effectively is to understand what our patients are dealing with outside of our four walls.

Will you elaborate on Mount Sinai Health System’s focus on prevention and addressing all of the issues that impact a person’s health?

A successful health system is an integrated system that is delivering a fully integrated care delivery which deals with prevention as well as care after a patient leaves the hospital after a health event. Hospitals are no longer an effective description of a healthcare provider. This is a description of a single building, but most of our care today takes place outside the walls of the hospital.

Mount Sinai has been on the front lines of the pandemic. How proud are you to see the resilience and strength of Mount Sinai’s workforce at all levels of the health system during this challenging and uncertain time?

There are no words that can express how proud I am of our team members across the entire organization. The level of involvement of our board of trustees from day one in offering their ideas and resources to support our needs, to our doctors and nurses and caregivers, to our support staff – it was remarkable to see how every person at Mount Sinai stepped up and put the patient first. I am also amazed at the resilience of the families of our employees who all paid a price for their family member providing front line care at Mount Sinai. There were parents that were not able to be present to help their kids with schooling, parents who were not able to go home since they did not want to risk getting their family members sick, and this takes a toll. I am so proud and grateful to the families of our workforce for the sacrifices they made so that we would be able to do our jobs and take care of our patients.

Will you highlight Mount Sinai Health System’s commitment to providing support for the emotional strain and psychological needs of its workforce coming out of the pandemic?

It is critical to provide emotional and psychological support. We provided many resources for our employees throughout the pandemic that will continue post-pandemic. During the pandemic, we provided everything from physical spaces where our employees could take a private moment away from the crisis to experts for them to rely on. It can be challenging in healthcare to get your employees to access these services since they are committed to trying to help, not to asking for help. We needed to be proactive and reach out to find ways for all of our employees to feel comfortable asking for the help they needed.

What do you tell young people about the opportunities for a career in the health-care industry?

We are creating opportunities and there will continue to be opportunities for people who bring innovation and ideas and collaboration to the position. The healthcare industry overall can be very tough and unforgiving. It is not a glamorous business. It is sad at times and it has rays of hope, but it is so meaningful. This is an industry where you are invited into people’s lives during the most meaningful moments and at a time when they have to make the toughest decisions. These moments can sometimes be the greatest joys such as childbirth, but can also be some of the greatest sorrows when making a decision about the next step on a loved one’s care. This is an industry where you can make a difference and I think that is pretty special.

You have been with Mount Sinai for more than 20 years. Did you imagine in the early days that this would have been an organization where you would spend so much of your career?

I expected to be here for three to four years. I had been a consultant earlier in my career and that is the lifespan of a consultant. The reality is that there is something special about working at Mount Sinai and for me it is about the people. We have built an amazing team that makes me want to come to work every morning and tackle new challenges. I have also been fortunate to have the opportunity to work for a tremendous mentor in our CEO, Dr. Davis, who has given me opportunities and challenges which has allowed me to continue to grow and learn. ●

“Our focus is not about a patient walking into one of our hospitals and then walking out a few days later. This is one piece of success, but our emphasis is on the continuum of care that they can get throughout their lives.”