




Leading the

**New Dean
Lawrence Chin, MD,
steers the**

College of Medicine
through the
coronavirus
health crisis
toward a new normal.



When Larry Chin, MD, was named dean of the College of Medicine in January, COVID-19 was not yet on his horizon. Dr. Chin, the former chair of neurosurgery who had served as interim dean since September, was focused on strengthening the medical education experience for Upstate students.

But within two months, Chin found himself shepherding the College and its medical students and faculty through the nation's biggest health emergency in modern history. The curriculum for first- and second-year students moved totally online. Third-year students were pulled from clinical rotations, both to reduce their exposure and to conserve personal protective equipment in the hospital and other clinical settings. And for the first time, Match Day was held virtually, with Upstate students receiving their match notification via email.

"We're going to get through this," said Chin at the end of March. "It may alter how we conduct business in the hospital and perhaps even how we teach in medical school. But despite current obstacles, our priorities haven't changed."

At the top of Chin's list are goals to improve diversity and inclusion on campus, address student wellness to combat burnout, and redesign the

curriculum to better prepare students for the way healthcare is delivered today. Each is a complicated issue, but Chin is accustomed to multitasking. In addition to dean and department chair, his roles at Upstate have included directing the Gamma Knife and neuro-oncology programs, serving as director of the neurosurgery residency program, and chairing the Governing Board of the SUNY Upstate Faculty Practice Plan.

As a neurosurgeon focused on brain tumor, skull base, and spine surgery, Chin is used to working under pressure. He's also known as a quiet leader who cares deeply about students and their educational experience.

Although he's scaled back his clinical activity significantly in his new role, he has not given up seeing patients or conducting surgery.

"As dean, I'm also responsible for the faculty and you don't know what their challenges are unless you're on the ground with them," Chin says. "For me to be a doctor means I have to do neurosurgery, but that also allows me to interact with the students in the natural setting."

From Clinician to Administrator

Chin has a vivid memory of receiving a doctor kit at five years old and thinking he wanted to be a brain surgeon. "I mean, what's cooler than the brain," he says.

Growing up in Troy, Michigan—the son of a General Motors engineer and a librarian—Chin didn't have any medical role models in the family. It wasn't until he was an undergraduate at the University of Michigan that he actually decided to pursue a career in medicine. But once he did, that meant being a neurosurgeon.

Chin stayed at the University of Michigan for medical school, then completed his neurosurgery residency at University of Southern California/Los Angeles County Hospital.

His first faculty position was at the University of Maryland, where he ran the Gamma Knife program and was the brain tumor specialist, developing research on cutting-edge treatments for benign and malignant brain tumors. In 2006, Chin was recruited to Boston University as chair of the Department of Neurosurgery. “That was the beginning of my administrative career. They had a learning community system, which really informed how I view the role of clinicians with regards to medical student education and advising students.”

“When you lead people . . . you don’t have to be an expert in everything, because you’re going to be working with people who are experts. You’re going to rely on their expertise. But you have to project the optimism and the enthusiasm that will allow them to use what they know to their fullest, so that they join you on the journey.”

At BU, Chin served briefly as assistant dean for multi-cultural affairs before making the move to Upstate in 2011.

“The Upstate Department of Neurosurgery has remarkable history. It was one of the first neurosurgery training programs, started in the 1950s by Robert King, MD, and has a distinguished history of training excellent neurosurgeons,” says Chin, who was “honored” to be asked to lead the department and named the Robert B. and Molly G. King Endowed Professor of Neurosurgery. “It was just a tremendous opportunity.”

Chin had made a mark advancing treatment of brain tumors and other neurological diseases with Gamma Knife radiosurgery, which is noninvasive and highly effective. But he brought with him more than just clinical prowess. His deep commitment to student education also became quickly apparent.

Chin worked with David Duggan, MD ’79, then dean of the College Medicine and Julie White, PhD, dean of student affairs, to develop a learning community system at Upstate similar to what he had experienced at Boston University. The idea was to create small communities within each class, led by faculty mentors, who develop relationships and become their own support system over time. Learning community activities provide students with advice and support, and cover concepts such as wellness, ethics,

community service and other intangibles gleaned from hearing the stories of physicians and older students, through which Chin says “students gain a greater understanding of what it’s like being a doctor.”

The program was launched with the incoming class in 2014, with five learning communities named after New York’s Finger Lakes. Chin likens them to the five fingers of a hand. “The community is really Upstate,” he says. “There are differences, but in the end we come together.”

In September 2019, Upstate Interim President Mantosh Dewan, MD, asked Chin to serve as interim dean. He says he never considered saying no.

“Dr. Dewan is one of the most thoughtful, caring people I’ve ever met, a guy that you don’t question when he asks you to do something,” says Chin. “If he thought I was the person that he wanted to lead the school, then I certainly wasn’t going to second guess him.”

Again, he saw it as a wonderful opportunity. “I’ve always been interested in teaching, which for a long time was limited to teaching residents,” he says. “Being able to devote most of my attention to the student experience and student education was something I couldn’t pass up.”

Evolving Medical Education

In an interview with the *Syracuse Post-Standard* last year about leadership, Chin described the best leaders as optimistic and enthusiastic team-builders.

“When you lead people . . . you don’t have to be an expert in everything, because you’re going to be working with people who are experts. You’re going to rely on their expertise. But you have to project the optimism and the enthusiasm that will allow them to use what they know to their fullest, so that they join you on the journey,” he said.

But Chin says there’s no substitution for having a vision for the path forward. “Whatever entity you’re trying to lead, where do you want to go?” he asks. “What’s the goal?”

Chin’s vision for the College of Medicine is clear. He wants to be a leader in medical care for underserved populations, which he believes requires changes in the demography of the physician workforce.

“One of the biggest issues in medicine is understanding why large segments of the population still don’t get the kind of health care that they deserve,” he says. “To address those issues, we need to train a more diverse physician workforce. I think that is an absolute must. The fact that medicine as a whole can be smarter and more effective by having diverse opinions and diverse people is unquestioned in my mind.”

Second is a renewed focus on student/physician wellness. It’s no secret that medical students, residents, and physicians suffer high rates of burnout, mental health issues, and suicide. “We can’t take care of patients if we’re not well ourselves. We’ve created positions at both the



Michael DePasquale, president of the Class of 2020, with Larry Chin, dean of the College of Medicine

College of Medicine and at the hospital to focus on wellness, which we hope will reduce burnout and improve patient care and safety,” Chin says.

He’s also hoping to impact student wellness through curricular changes that will expedite medical education and reduce the student debt burden. Chin is spearheading a major revamp of the College of Medicine curriculum to better reflect current trends in healthcare delivery. “We’re going to include inter-professional education,” he says. “Every day, we work with nurse practitioners, physician assistants, therapists, pharmacists, all sorts of medical professionals that are not just other doctors, so that has got to be part of our education.”

The new curriculum will also draw from research on active learning and best practices in medical education. “There’s a tremendous amount of research that shows active learning is more effective than just sitting and listening to someone lecture,” says Chin. “In recent years, there’s been more emphasis on problem solving and case studies along with simulation, and that’s the direction we’re moving.”

Chin says he hopes to have a new re-imagined curriculum in place for the entering class in 2022. The biggest change would be the move to a curriculum that gives students the option to finish in three years. “Student debt is a major hurdle to student/physician wellness. Right now, students interview for residency programs and take away rotations and electives in their fourth year but don’t have many requirements otherwise,” he says. “I believe we can make the curriculum more efficient by having students spend their time on things that are truly educational while providing electives that suit individual interest.”

The goal is to improve the physician workforce in Central New York and beyond. “I think the new curriculum is going to be something students will really like and something we’ll be proud of,” he says.

The New Normal

On Friday, March 19, Chin gathered in the Upstate Education Communications Studio with Upstate Interim President Mantosh Dewan, Dean of Students Julie White, and Class of 2020 President Mike DePasquale. Standing six feet apart, they each delivered a video message to fourth-year students. And as the clock struck noon, students received email notification of their residency placements.

“I feel terrible that we couldn’t give them the celebration that they deserved but they did really well in the match,” Chin says.

More than half of the class will enter primary care specialties. Fifty-six percent of graduating students will stay in New York State for residency, with 36 staying in Syracuse. “Hopefully, by the time they’re starting in July, we’ll be through the worst of the coronavirus,” says Chin.

At the College of Medicine, adjustments continue as the situation unfolds.

This year’s third-year students will need to finish their spring clinical rotations next fall. “Right now they’re watching surgeries and clinical examinations online but there are some experiences that just can’t be replaced,” says Chin.

He does not expect that the “commit” deadline for next year’s class will be changed. “I anticipate we’ll start on time, but it’s hard to know,” he says. “The coronavirus is probably not going to be completely gone so dealing with it is going to be a new reality for us. We’re minding the store, but we also need to take care of one another and adapt where necessary.” ■