Liaison with medical staff

Hospital Names Jean Kutner First Chief Medical Officer

By Tyler Smith

By any measure, Jean Kutner, MD, MSPH, has had plenty to keep her busy. She heads the University of Colorado School of Medicine’s Division of General Internal Medicine — the largest in the Department of Medicine with some 250 faculty. A nationally recognized leader in geriatric medicine and palliative care, Kutner co-chairs the Palliative Care Research Cooperative (PCRC) Group, a National Institutes of Health-funded consortium that has broken new ground in interdisciplinary studies in the field.

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And new challenges lay ahead for Kutner. She was elected president-elect of University of Colorado Hospital’s medical staff in 2011 and was slated to take the reins as president from Robert McIntyre, MD, in 2015.

But now Kutner’s career will veer into new territory. She will become University of Colorado Hospital’s first chief medical officer (CMO) July 1. At the same time, she will step down as division head of General Internal Medicine and as president-elect of the medical staff.

Kutner’s appointment puts a School of Medicine faculty member at the center of decision making for the hospital, the School of Medicine and the UCHealth system. It follows an early 2013 Provider Satisfaction Survey at UCH that showed some providers felt they weren’t adequately involved in the hospital’s decision-making process, and that the priorities of faculty and the hospital were not always aligned.

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Broad responsibilities. In a letter sent May 30 to University of Colorado Health employees and medical staff, UCHealth Interim President and CEO Bill Neff, MD, reeled off a host of issues Kutner will take on in her new role, including working with medical staff and nursing leaders on clinical effectiveness, quality, and safety initiatives; improving patient access and communication with community providers; fostering a “culture of service excellence”; and helping to develop strategic initiatives for UCH and UCHealth.

Kutner will sit at the crossroads of all strategic, clinical, and operational decisions for the hospital and system, representing “the academic perspective,” as Neff put it in his letter. She will be one of four members of Harney’s senior management team, along with Chief Nursing Officer Carolyn Sanders, RN, PhD; Chief Operating Officer Tom Gronow; and Chief Financial Officer Barbara Carveth.

Jean Kutner, MD, MSPH, was chosen CMO from among 13 internal applicants.

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She will also be associate dean for clinical affairs for the School of Medicine and will sit with the Senior Executive Group (SEG), the body that drives high-level strategy and decision making for UCHealth.

“It’s truly a joint appointment,” said Harney, who was copied on Neff’s letter, along with Richard Krugman, MD, dean of the CU School of Medicine; Doug Jones, MD, senior associate dean for clinical affairs with the School of Medicine; and SEG.

Well-credentialed. Neff chaired a CMO search committee that drew 13 applicants from the School of Medicine. Kutner emerged as one of three finalists and earned the nod on the basis of her “well-rounded set of skills,” in the clinical, research, education, and administrative arenas, Harney said. The Department of General Internal Medicine grew significantly during her 12-year tenure as division chief, and she participated in the successful effort by all eight of the hospital’s primary care practices to achieve National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) designation as patient-centered medical homes.

Kutner’s ability to work closely with colleagues at UCHealth North (Poudre Valley Hospital and Medical Center of the Rockies) and UCHealth South (Memorial Hospital) also counted strongly in her favor, Harney added.

“Jean seemed to have a vision for where the position needs to go,” he said. “We can write whatever we want into the job description for CMO, but in the end it comes down to how well that person interacts with others.”

Joining forces. For her part, Kutner echoed the importance of using the new position to help medical staff, the hospital, the system, and other constituencies find common ground.

“It’s important to have at the executive level the voice of the academic physician and have that perspective at the table,” she said. “But it’s a bidirectional process. We need shared perspectives in order to work together to be better than we are now.”

She has a plan to do that. With about a month to spare before starting the new position, Kutner said in a phone interview that she was developing a list of “key stakeholders” and plans to “go on walk-about” to meet with all of them in her first two or three months as CMO. She’ll also regularly round inpatient units and ambulatory clinics with her hospital administrative partners to listen to people working on the front lines.

“There is a lot going on, and it would be presumptuous of me to start from scratch with my own plans,” she said. “I can’t walk in and start changing things just for the sake of change.”

Still, Kutner plans to leave her mark on the job. “I told the search committee, ‘I love my current job,’” she said. “In order for me to take on the CMO position, it has to be meaningful.”