My Turn: 'Exodus' at UA medical schools opens unique opportunity

Darrell Wadas, AZ I See It  4:36 p.m. MST July 5, 2016

Doctor: Changes at University of Arizona medical schools in Phoenix and Tucson could create something greater than this state has ever seen.

I value the opinions of my colleagues at the Arizona Medical Association (I have been a member for decades), but I believe the changes at the University of Arizona medical schools in Tucson and Phoenix may provide the impetus to create something far greater than this state has ever seen.

The Arizona Medical Society leadership recently voiced concerns about the “exodus” of leaders from the University of Arizona College of Medicine-Phoenix. Others have raised concerns about the influence of Banner Health in decision-making at the College of Medicine. Some of these concerns have been raised by individuals who are not closely involved in medical education or the merger process.

Consider the other side

I am in a unique position to assess the process and feel it is important that the public obtain a balanced viewpoint. This is my opinion, and is not necessarily the opinion of the Banner University Medical Center Phoenix medical staff, Banner Health, or the University of Arizona College of Medicine.

I am the first chief of staff for Banner-University Medical Center Phoenix (B-UMCP), which was formerly Banner Good Samaritan Medical Center. I have been involved in medical education at that hospital for more than 30 years.

MY TURN: UA's med school has big problems (/story/opinion/op-ed/2015/09/01/phoenix-medical-school-accreditation/71543700/)

I have been lecturing at the University of Arizona College of Medicine-Phoenix since its inception. I am a great fan of the former dean, Dr. Stuart Flynn. My daughter, Erica, is a 2015 graduate of the School of Medicine, and, I believe, received great training. I am not a Banner Health employee or an employee of the medical school. I helped found Arizona Digestive Health, which now has over 60 providers of gastrointestinal services throughout Maricopa County.

In my current role as chief of staff at B-UMCP, I have been involved in building relationships between the faculty in Tucson and Phoenix and the physicians at their respective hospitals.

Change is difficult, but the changes that have occurred in both cities are expected, and for the most part, highly positive.

A school built with little public money

In Phoenix, Dean Flynn built a medical school with very little public funding, and deserves credit for encouraging talented physicians from throughout the Valley to donate their time and skills to provide an outstanding, innovative, educational experience to UA medical students. It is totally expected that some of his staff would follow him to Texas.

In Tucson, it has been well recognized for decades that it has been difficult to keep faculty in a program that has not been well funded by the Legislature. The two Tucson teaching hospitals have struggled to be profitable for many years.

OUR TURN: Banner-UA partnership is paying off (/story/opinion/op-ed/2016/03/01/ua-banner-health-partnership/8114072/)

The faculty in both Tucson and Phoenix have outstanding new leadership. Dr. Skip Garcia, the senior vice president for Health Sciences, in charge of both medical schools, is well respected for his ability to obtain grants to generate meaningful research, and has displayed the ability to help others obtain research grants. Dr. Ken Ramos, interim dean of the UA College of Medicine-Phoenix, and Dr. Chuck Cairns, dean of the UA College of Medicine-Tucson, are world-renowned leaders in research in their areas of expertise.
Their skills and the skills of the people they will recruit have the potential to make the University of Arizona one of the premier research facilities in the world. Applicants interviewing for department chiefs and other key positions are some of the most outstanding minds in the country.

**Why universities need support**

The association with Banner Health, a not-for-profit system of 29 hospitals, allows a unique opportunity for one of the most innovative hospital systems in the U.S. to partner with the UA to promote research on how to provide value-based medicine with an emphasis on quality.

In addition to the substantial investment that Banner has made in the academic medical centers in Tucson and Phoenix, it has also committed $20 million per year for 30 years to support academics and research. This money will be available to both Tucson and Phoenix colleges of medicine. Safeguards are in place to protect the role of the medical schools and the medical school deans.

The increasing power of hospital-based systems to influence the direction of medical care in the U.S. has changed the medical landscape. It is important for physicians to be involved in the governance of these systems to provide the checks and balances (and common sense) that are so often missing in the process.

This is the beginning phase of an investment which will make Arizona a national center for cutting-edge medical advances, top-tier education, and the favorite home of world-class physicians.

Please encourage your legislators to support our colleges and universities. The return on the investment is something we can’t afford to lose.

Dr. Darrell Wadas is chief of staff at Banner-University Medical Center Phoenix and a clinical assistant professor at the University of Arizona Medical School. Email him at darrellwadas@gmail.com; follow on Twitter, @dwadas_md.

Read or Share this story: http://azc.cc/29v3g4U