

Laura Kaiser

Laura Kaiser of SSM Health brings courage, conviction to questions around healthcare's future



U.S. healthcare has more questions than answers right now, but Laura Kaiser doesn't shy away from them.

As the new president and CEO of SSM Health, Kaiser brings an impeccable resume back to her hometown of St. Louis, along with an inquisitive mind and a willingness to eschew the status quo.

"We need to think about how we make healthcare sustainable, affordable and accessible," she says. "There's always going to be a need for emergency care – acute, critical care, for injuries and illnesses that are unforeseen. But we need to invest in programs and services to minimize chronic conditions that are in fact preventable, because that will help us lower the overall cost of care."

She's outlined some of her thinking in major periodicals as co-author of articles in the *Harvard Business Review* and the *New England Journal of Medicine*. In *HBR*, she opined on "Turning Value-Based Care Into A Real

Business Model." And, in the medical journal, she and co-author Thomas Lee, MD, were blunt in encouraging big pharma to become full partners in the quest for value-based care: "As payers and providers work together to improve value, will pharmaceutical

companies after that was published, and they are interested in having further dialogue."

Kaiser has no problem saying that healthcare is a right, not a privilege, for all humans, a stance her faith-based system supports completely.

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companies join that effort, or will they acts as vendors that merely maximize short-term profits for shareholders?"

"I think any approach to affordable care must have all stakeholders involved and engaged," she says today. "I actually heard from one of the pharma

"I've said this to many people without any intended partisan viewpoint," Kaiser says. "No matter where you sit politically, healthcare isn't political. For all of its flaws, the Affordable Care Act did three very important things. First, it heightened awareness about the need to provide excellent healthcare to all

Americans. Second, it alleviated some financial hardship for people with pre-existing conditions. Last, it extended the availability of healthcare for people up to the age of 26 on their parents' insurance coverage."

A year and a half ago, Kaiser saw a different approach to healthcare

during a fact-finding mission to Cuba, and she has been ruminating on it ever since.

"I wanted to see how it is that this small country – and one that has relatively limited resources compared to the U.S. – has better health outcomes than we do," says Kaiser. "How are they doing that?"

Kaiser discovered that physicians, nurses and statisticians are embedded in each community at a rate of about one for every 1,000 to 1,500 residents.

"I visited a few of those clinicians," Kaiser says. "Their medical records are spiral-bound notebooks with pencils. They

The end of life brings questions, and courage, too

Much of the country's healthcare spending occurs during the final weeks and months of patients' lives. SSM Health President and CEO Laura Kaiser says that needs to be discussed openly and extensively.

"Discussing death and dying is becoming more acceptable thanks to people like Dr. Atul Gawande, who wrote the wonderful book *Being Mortal*, and Sheryl Sandberg, the author of *Option B*, a powerfully written book about recovering after suffering the loss of her husband," says Kaiser, whose parents eventually chose hospice care after battling cancer. "Death and dying can be difficult to discuss, but it is something we need to grapple with as a country and as a society."

She saw great courage in her parents as they made difficult decisions at the end of their lives. "What my dad chose and experienced in hospice was beautiful care. It is what everyone should have if that's where you find yourself," Kaiser says. "Many years later, my mom made the same choice and had a similarly

extraordinary experience."

Her parents' bravery flows through Kaiser and gives her confidence while she confronts complex issues as one of the nation's leading healthcare executives. Kaiser's dad, a chemical engineer, was her first mentor about leadership. She has fond memories of him from her childhood, listening to classical music in the car while driving to the library together. They shared a love for the "Peanuts" cartoons – especially Lucy, seated in her counseling booth, offering a listening ear for five cents.

"I trusted my dad's counsel and would knock on his home-office door, saying, 'I have my nickel.' He would say, 'Come on in for the consult,'" says Kaiser with a chuckle. "I had many 'consults' with him and am the better for it today."

provide primary care to patients and, if they need a higher level of care, patients are sent to a specialty practice, similar to a federally qualified health center in the U.S. If they end up needing hospitalization, they are simply referred to one of the hospitals across the country. It is a single system.”

And medicine is free, including insulin for people with diabetes.

“A lot of people in the U.S. have to make the terrible choice between buying medicines or food,” she says. “If we changed our approach, we could create incentives for people

to stay healthy, and the overall cost of healthcare in this country would decrease. So, that’s my dream.”

At the time of the trip, Kaiser was chief operating officer of Intermountain Healthcare, a Utah-based health system known far and wide for its quality. Earlier in her career, she spent 15 years with St. Louis-based Ascension, another health system with a stellar reputation. Now, in taking the helm as only the third CEO in SSM Health’s history, she has a similarly pristine heritage to draw from – SSM Health was the

first health system to be awarded the prestigious Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award in 2002.

“The organization is deeply rooted in continuous quality improvement,” she says. “They have been on the cutting edge since the time of the Baldrige award, so there really is a great foundation on which to build the health system of the future.”

The answers that Kaiser and her team come up with should offer some interesting architecture for the future of SSM Health – and American healthcare. [MPI](#)