

CEO Viewpoint

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If the times call for leaders who can move easily among different worlds, then John Bluford is well positioned for success. Born in Philadelphia and raised in Columbia, S.C., the president and CEO of Truman Medical Centers in Kansas City, Mo., recalls spending summer vacations and holidays in the Northeast while growing up in the South. "I got the benefit of both cultures," says Bluford, 60. "I can be as urban or as Southern as you like me to be." That background has served him well at Truman, which combines the roles of top academic medical center and urban safety-net hospital. It has also brought him into national prominence. Bluford is chair-elect of the American Hospital Association's Board of Trustees and will assume the chairmanship in 2011. Balancing opposites seems to extend to his family life as well. Bluford has a son and daughter twins; one in Kansas City and the other in Chicago. His wife Joanne hails from a suburb of Nashville, Tennessee, where they met in undergraduate school. Bluford earned a master's of business administration from Northwestern University in Chicago and his bachelor's degree from Fisk University in Nashville. He also attended Harvard University's Executive Program in Health System Management.

What are the top two or three issues you face as CEO of Truman Medical Centers?

The first thing is the general political conservatism surrounding state funding for Medicaid. My institution is a safety-net facility in metro Kansas City and a good share of our revenue is Medicaid. The other issue is the amount of unfunded mandates as they relate to undocumented citizens. The combination of those two factors speaks to tight or non-existent revenue streams. The flip side is uncovered lives.

Will these issues change under the current administration in Washington?

Well, I sincerely hope they do change because major reform needs to happen. The reality is at this point in time we best hope for incremental change over the long haul and a centerpiece of that change must be coverage for all.



JOHN W. BLUFORD

Can you identify two or three benefits that IT has had on your organization?

First, the pace of information submission and retrieval has accelerated exponentially. In many respects there are positive elements to that, but we have to step back and reflect on the barrage of information it creates.

Second, the integration of eligibility systems between the state and our own institution that facilitates our revenue stream. As a result of that IT integration, we estimate we generate

\$8 million in payments for patients who otherwise wouldn't be eligible for treatment.

Third, one of the best things we did at Truman was to implement PACS [picture archiving and communication systems] in 2000. Going totally digital in medical imag-

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ing has helped us immensely in diagnosis and quality of care. A side benefit is that it has also helped greatly in the recruiting of radiologists.

What do you believe are the most significant near-term challenges that arise from implementing Information Technologies?

The biggest challenge is that once you acquire the equipment you then have to constantly update the equipment. Then there are hidden training costs and that's an ongoing challenge. The other thing I'd mention is the culture change required in the organization. You not only have to define user requirements for today but what they ought to be. That requires thinking out into the future. Lastly is the question of how to manage the public interface. Do you allow patient X to dial in and pull out their medical record? There are legal, ethical and privacy issues that still need to be thought out. These are issues related to openness, accessibility and transparency.

What has been the biggest change you have seen in healthcare over your career?

Over the past 30 years, it's the growth in the overall complexity of the business. There are multiple constituencies—not just the patient versus the doc. There are businesses, the Chamber of Commerce, faith-based organizations, the community as a whole and contract labor. In our business schools Hospital Administration 101 covered managing FTEs, building buildings and overseeing a budget. Today it's about managing relationships, information, innovation and creativity. That's an evolving new set of skills.

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What is the best piece of advice you've ever been given?

I really have to think about this one. To be patient, to continue doing what you're doing, stick with it, be on time and follow through.

What advice would you give to a young person seeking to enter the healthcare field?

I'd suggest be a sponge, gather all the information you can, take on tough assignments and don't worry about the money.

What is your favorite part of the work you do?

That's an easy one. Helping people solve problems. I really enjoy conversing with rank-and-file employees and patients, because

you can't lead without engaged followers. I like to build that comradery in the organization.

If you weren't running Truman Medical Centers, what would you be doing?

I'd probably be overseeing some college or university program, working with young adults. That's the realistic answer. My "wish" answer would be to be a jazz musician. Currently I play stereo. Of course, Kansas City has great jazz.

What is the biggest mistake you ever made?

Wrecking my boss's car in April 1977. Most recently, in 2006, I had an overzealous implementation of Six Sigma. I wish I could reel that back and redo it more incrementally.



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