

From SCBiz.com

Endowed chairs program helping to lead South Carolina toward economic excellence



By James Hammond, Staff writer
April 23, 2009

Infection is the nemesis of every open-heart surgery team.

Every patient runs the statistical risk of becoming the 1 in 50 who requires follow-up surgery to deal with post-operative infection.

In South Carolina, that could be more than 100 patients of the approximately 6,000 open-heart procedures performed annually across the state. Everywhere, that is, except at Palmetto Health Heart Hospital, where the surgeons of Carolina Cardiovascular Surgery have not had a patient acquire an infection in two years.

Dr. Shawn Stinson, vice president for clinical quality and patient safety at Columbia's Palmetto Health, said the heart surgery team decided that the national 2% rate of infection was unacceptable, and they set out to change it.

"Two years and no infections is an extraordinary accomplishment by any measure. But, this is exactly what our patients expect from us — a safe, infection-free experience," Stinson said in early February as he participated in the unveiling of an initiative with Health Sciences South Carolina to extend the benefits of his hospital's experience statewide.

The members of Health Sciences South Carolina — the Greenville Hospital System, Spartanburg Regional and the Medical University of South Carolina hospitals — are fundamental to the extension of the benefits of Palmetto Health's experience to all 65 acute-care hospitals in the state.

Health Sciences South Carolina President Jay Moskowitz, who holds the state's endowed research chair in clinical and translational research at the University of

South Carolina, will use his Center of Economic Excellence to analyze Palmetto Health's experience and pass on the findings to other health care providers.

"There is no question in anyone's mind that health care-associated infections take a tremendous toll on patients, family members, caregivers, hospitals and society at large," Moskowitz said. "One patient harmed is one patient too many."

Moskowitz cited statistics showing that a preventable infection acquired in a hospital adds an average of eight days to a hospitalization and doubles the cost. Nationwide, the cost of such infections is \$6.2 billion.

To address the problem, Moskowitz is using the resources of his endowed chair and Health Sciences South Carolina to create the S.C. Healthcare Quality Trust, a hospital and research initiative to address chronic and acute disease. More than \$1.7 million will pay for the statewide program, provided by Health Sciences South Carolina, the S.C. Hospital Association and Premier Inc., a Charlotte-based health care alliance.

Centers of Economic Excellence

The endowed chair held by Moskowitz is one of 20 research positions funded by the S.C. General Assembly in partnership with private and federal government donors. The Centers of Economic Excellence require the sponsoring research university to obtain grants to match the endowments that the General Assembly set up with lottery profits.

Medical University of South Carolina President Ray Greenberg said the endowed chairs would not have been possible without the financial support of the S.C. General Assembly and the Duke Endowment.

"Everyone owes a debt of gratitude to The Duke Endowment, which three years ago pledged \$21 million to Health Sciences South Carolina to support the establishment of the Center for Healthcare Quality and to successfully implement the Center of Economic Excellence program," Greenberg said.

Greenberg said the General Assembly's commitment "illustrates the power of the CoEE program to ignite a vision and, even in our down economy, to make progress."

With the General Assembly facing massive spending cuts because of shrinking tax revenues, the future of additional funding for the program is unclear. House Speaker Bobby Harrell has made the endowed chairs program a hallmark of his leadership and promises to protect its funding. But Gov. Mark Sanford's proposed budget would drop funding for the research chairs at USC, MUSC and Clemson University.

Said Harrell: "I don't know what will happen this year, but the long term is to keep it on track and fully funded at \$30 million."

Sanford also proposed cutting the program from last year's budget, but the General Assembly approved the expenditure.

"We passed a law last year to ensure its funding," Harrell said.

The endowed chairs program is the centerpiece of new institutions such as Clemson's International Center for Automotive Research, where several of the endowed research professorships will be based.

Clemson President James Barker said he was disappointed but not surprised by Sanford's recommendations.

Outside of South Carolina, the endowed chairs program gets high marks for its scientific, economic development and job creation potential. And in interview after interview, the scientists who have come to South Carolina to live and work have said that the state's support for the research program played a major role in their decisions to relocate here.

The program supports a diverse group of researchers who have been attracted to the Palmetto State by the cooperation among the state's research universities. The 20 current research chairs include:

- Dr. Melanie Thomas, who is developing new screenings and treatments for gastrointestinal cancers at MUSC.
- Paul Venhovens, who is working to make vehicles safer and more efficient at Clemson University's International Center for Automotive Research.

-Physicist Richard Webb, a member of the National Academy of Sciences, who is developing electronics for the future at USC.

-Kenneth Reifsnider, a member of the National Academy of Engineering, who is developing future fuels technology in his work on solid oxide fuel cells.

The program's backers recently released a report by the Washington Advisory Group that indicates that not only is the program working, it is considered one to be emulated.

In six years, the program has generated more than 2,000 jobs and \$246 million in nonstate investments and pledges to the program.

The endowed chairs program has had "a profound and positive impact on the prospects for economic growth and diversification in the state of South Carolina," according to the report, commissioned by the S.C. Commission on Higher Education.

The Washington Advisory Group, a Washington, D.C., company that provides strategic advisory services and management consulting to research universities, companies, governments and nonprofit organizations, conducted the study.

The objective of the study, which cost about \$400,000, was to assess the effectiveness of the program in meeting its statutory goals, not to evaluate the work carried out within the centers, which are located at the state's three research universities.

As part of the study, Washington Advisory Group consultants interviewed more than 150 program participants and stakeholders at universities and in the public and private sectors from August through October.

The report said the program has raised the quality and relevance of university research, improved the stature of the research universities and increased collaboration among the universities and between the universities and the private sector.

Economic impacts in terms of increased external funding, job creation and business location decisions have been significant and can be expected to grow as the program matures, the report said.

The Washington Advisory Group determined that more than 2,000 jobs have been created or attracted to South Carolina by the program; that the state's investment has been leveraged more than 3-to-1 by nonstate matching funds and competitive research awards won; and the program's most significant economic contributions are focused in three industrial sectors: energy and environment, advanced manufacturing and health.

The consultants identified actions to improve the program's effectiveness and economic impact, the foremost being a determination that funding the program should continue as a high priority for South Carolina.

“There is a perception that there is a challenge getting matching funds, but we’ve been able to get pledges,” MUSC’s Greenberg said. “The question is with the downturn in the economy, will we still receive the pledges from private donors?”

Greenberg said he believes they will.

“Our conclusion is that the CoEE program is an extraordinary effort by the state of South Carolina to invest in its knowledge economy and is a best-in-kind program that is, or should be, the envy of other states,” the report said.

Bob Bouyea contributed to this report.