Med School Startups

How new medical schools at UCF and FIU are taking shape — and what they mean for Florida. p.47

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Startup: A Focus on the Underserved

Last fall, as Dr. John Rock was negotiating to accept the position of founding dean of the college of medicine at Florida International University in Miami, the program got some very bad news. Miami philanthropist Dr. Herbert Wertheim, an FIU trustee and longtime benefactor, had rescinded his $20-million donation to the med school, which was to bear his name. The Wertheim gift, worth $40 million including matching funds, had been the largest in FIU’s history and had helped convince the Legislature to approve the school in the first place.

“It was important enough to the overall plan that, if I’d been John Rock, I might have had second, third and fourth thoughts,” says FIU professor Bruce Haaptli, chair of the Faculty Senate. “But he was so committed to building the medical school envisioned here that he did not waver.”

That vision incorporates a new, urban-focused approach to training doctors that is tied to the community and improves access to healthcare in a metropolitan area with the highest medically underserved population in Florida. Nearly 30% of Miami-Dade residents are uninsured, compared to 19% statewide. The school aims to bring together health disciplines from social workers to nurses to practice in and improve the health of specific neighborhoods, with benchmarking to show progress over time. And it intends to graduate bilingual doctors likely to set up practice in south Florida and stay put. Those “culturally competent doctors,” as Rock calls them, will be trained to understand both medical and non-medical subtleties in Hispanic, African-American and other cultures.

A highly regarded administrator and academic who most recently served as chancellor and CEO of the Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center in New Orleans, Rock, 61, made it his first order of business to lure big names to Miami for his leadership team. He hired a member of the National Academy of Sciences, genetics researcher Dr. Joe Leigh Simpson of Baylor, as head of academic affairs. He tapped the chairman of the department of surgery at LSU’s med school, Dr. J. Patrick O’Leary, to lead clinical affairs. As head of student affairs, Rock hired Dr. Sanford Markham, former assistant dean of student affairs at the University of Iowa’s College of Medicine.

Rock “is a builder, a developer, with the personal gravitas to be able to attract top-level people without even having a school yet,” says Dr. Jeffrey Horstmyer, a neurologist at Miami’s Mercy Hospital who is president of the hospital’s 900-member medical staff and chairman of FIU’s College of Medicine Founders program devoted to early fund raising. “His first hires really underscore that persona.”

Perhaps the best reflection of the school’s mission is found in Rock’s fourth major hire, Dr. Pedro Jose “Joe” Greer, a gastroenterologist who has spent his career bringing healthcare to the poor and disadvantaged in Miami. Greer founded Camillus Health Concern, an agency that provides medical care to the city’s homeless, after an encounter with a homeless man dying from tuberculosis. Greer also founded the St. John Bosco Clinic, which provides care to undocumented immigrants. Rock named Greer assistant dean of academicaffairs, with a mission “to instill that calling in aspiring physicians.”

Rock took a similar approach at LSU, where he tried to make the med school more clinical- and community-oriented. While those trends in medical education have taken hold across the nation, it was challenging to achieve them in a well-established health center where “the traditional cultural issues come into play any time you develop new programs,” Rock says.

“With a new opportunity, especially recruiting in this environment,” he says, “it’s extremely exciting for someone to think of making his or her mark in medical education.” At FIU, “the culture we create will be all our own.”

This spring, Rock and academic affairs chief Simpson submitted FIU’s accreditation packet to the Liaison Committee on Medical Education, beating the deadline for a site visit and provisional accreditation in December. He doesn’t see the new program’s lack of accreditation and reputation as obstacles to attracting top-shelf faculty and the best medical students. “FIU does have a reputation — as a majority minority school with an excellent School of Public Health and excellent School of Nursing with a real commitment to the community,” he says. “I don’t see this as a risk. It’s very well-defined. This is for someone who wants to make a difference.”

A major challenge remaining for Rock, along with FIU President Modesto Maidique, is coming up with funding for the scholarships that will be vital to at least some potential students. At this point, Rock does not expect to be able to offer full rides to all 40 members of his inaugural class.

Half of Wertheim’s gift had been earmarked for a medical education endowment to fund scholarships, professorships, lec-
Dr. John Rock

**BORN:** 1946 in Corpus Christi, Texas

**FAMILY:** Married to Martha Rock; three grown children from a previous marriage live in Washington, D.C.

**MED SCHOOL:** Louisiana State University

**RESIDENCY:** Duke University

**FELLOWSHIP:** Johns Hopkins University

**ADDITIONAL:** Master's degree from the Harvard School of Public Health

**MEDICAL SPECIALTY:** Obstetrics-gynecology/reproductive endocrinology

**CAREER TRACK:** Most recently, chancellor of the Health Sciences Center at Louisiana State University with management oversight of Louisiana's statewide Charity Hospital System. Former director of the Division of Reproductive Endocrinology and the Department of Gynecology and Obstetrics at Johns Hopkins; former chairman and director of OB/GYN residency training programs at Emory

**SALARY:** $500,000

**MEDICAL ADVICE:** "I cannot emphasize enough the importance of preventive healthcare: Regular exercise, excellent diet, seeing your doctor for healthcare prevention."

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**FAST START:** Dr. John Rock has already made a handful of top-level appointments, including Dr. Pedro Jose Greer, a gastroenterologist who has spent his career bringing healthcare to the poor in Miami.

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...and residen... (The university says Wertheim tried to back off an initial promise to donate his $20 million in an upfront, lump sum. Wertheim says when he communicated his need to stagger the payments to avoid a tax hit, Maidique insulted him by saying he got naming rights to the med school "on the cheap" — that they were worth more in the neighborhood of $100 million.)

While FIU officials acknowledge the loss of Wertheim's millions was a blow, they believe they can find new funding sources. Horstmyer, the neurologist who is heading up the college's Founders program, says Miami "has a lot of untapped wealth," particularly among Hispanic donors just reaching the level of success that allows them to make significant gifts. "FIU trains more Hispanics than any other university in the country, and there are so many graduates still in the area who were educated at FIU and committed to the university," Horstmyer says. "I think FIU is better positioned than any other organization in the community to tap into that."

While Horstmyer, Maidique and others solicit donors and dream of the economic-development opportunities the med school is sure to bring Miami, Rock is focused on one primary goal: Accreditation. "Ultimately, we're going to be judged by how we provide access to healthcare for the underserved, and whether we can create new doctors for south Florida," Rock says. "I think the message is clear from the citizens of the state and the Legislature. We accept that challenge."