



## Elliot J. Sussman, MD, MBA

### Chair of the AAMC

BY ANGELA MUNASQUE

**E**lliot J. Sussman, MD, MBA, is the new AAMC chair. He is President and Chief Executive Officer of Lehigh Valley Hospital and Health Network in Pennsylvania, where he has served since 1993. Previously, he was Associate Dean and Associate Professor of Medicine at the University of Chicago, and Executive Director for Clinical Practices and Associate Professor of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania.

#### In what direction would you like to take the AAMC, and how will you accomplish those goals?

It seems to me that one thing to do is to see that our communities are served, with patient care, and by training the next generation of physicians, and by discovery and all the research that is done. I don't think that we still have really articulated as well as we might for our community what academic medicine does, and what it doesn't do. Part of this is helping to make the understanding of the academic medicine community more acute for everyone.

As academic medicine has become increasingly complicated and specialized, sometimes we've gotten more and more compartmentalized. Another thing I'd like to see is that we look for ways to better connect our missions of research and education and patient care. I think the way that happens is by looking for new ways to take the principal groups that represent those missions—the Council of Deans, the Council of Teaching Hospitals and Health Systems, and the Council of Academic Societies—and look for ways for them to better work together.

Finally, [another goal] would be advocating for academic medicine. For example, this country is in for an increasingly serious and overdue conversation about infrastructure, and clearly, we could demonstrate the usefulness of appropriate investments that could come through in increases in the



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research budget in basic sciences or health care research.

#### What is the best part of being a medical student now, and what are the biggest challenges?

For me, the best part of being a medical student is that you're training to be a physician, which I still can't imagine a better thing to

be when one grows up. The idealism that one continues to see—the energy, the creativity, the devotion to service—in medical students today is powerful. Spending time with medical students is like being plugged into a socket and getting recharged.

Far and away, the biggest single issue is the extraordinary debt that medical students are saddled with. We need to find a much more efficient way of seeing that these young women and men can make choices that are not influenced quite so much by the underlying economics.

#### In recent years, there has been a movement with making health care more accessible—does the AAMC have a position on this?

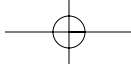
The AAMC has just come out with a position paper on principles of health care reform, and the very first principle is that coverage be available to all. The idea of access is critical, but I don't think the public sees it in terms of "access." Our public says, "Look, health care must be guaranteed, it must be affordable, and I want choice." For true reform, I think you really have to deal with the coverage and accessibility questions.

#### How will you transition into your new role, and what practical adjustments will this entail?

One of the delights about academic medicine, and specifically the AAMC, is the strong ethic of giving back. There are lots

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and lots of volunteers involved in all the various groups that constitute the AAMC, and the good news is that there is an excellent staff led by Darrell Kirch, President and CEO of the AAMC. They really help to make the transition for me and everyone else who serves academic medicine through the AAMC as painless as possible.

With that said, we all make choices in our lives, about how we spend our time. So will that mean some time away from Lehigh Valley Hospital? Sure, it will be, more than I traditionally spend, but I'm really fortunate to work with a wonderful bunch of people here, and a group of people who roundly endorse both my colleagues and management, as well as the members of my board of trustees, what academic medicine and specifically the AAMC stands for. You make those choices, and they do involve—for all of us—some degree of sacrifice, but that's okay. ❖

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