

PERSONALITIES OF PITTSBURGH

DR. G. ALAN YEASTED

Transforming community care



JOE WOJCIK

St. Clair Hospital Chief Medical Officer Dr. G. Alan Yeasted was the first of six children in his family to go to college. His father was a crane operator at Allegheny Ludlum's Brackenridge Works who painted houses on the side and taught Yeasted the value of education. At age 13, Yeasted's first job was scraping paint off houses for his dad for 50 cents an hour. Painting houses helped support Yeasted through medical school. Though he briefly considered becoming a Catholic priest, Yeasted said the study of medicine has been a calling.

You were the first in your family to attend college. What was that like?
 I grew up in Tarentum, the fourth of six kids. I was the first son in my family. My father couldn't afford to send us all to college, so the decision was made, granted this was an old-type decision, that the boys would go to college. Since then, my sisters have all gone to college and have done well.

How did you decide to make a career in medicine?
 In high school, I was a fairly avid reader of novels. And I remember "Alas, Babylon." It was a novel about what would happen after a nuclear war. What impressed me was the populace turned to the physician as the person who could make decisions

BIO BOX

Title: Senior vice president and chief medical officer, St. Clair Hospital
Age: 66
Education: B.S., biology, St. Vincent College; University of Pittsburgh Medical School
Experience: Yeasted has been practicing medicine for 37 years and has been chief medical officer at St. Clair Hospital for the past 15 years. At the same time, he continues to see patients in a primary-care practice and still makes house calls.

for everyone, and that was pretty impressive. I thought that was kind of a nice position to be in.

St. Clair had two highly publicized deaths from medical errors in the early 1990s. Since then, the hospital has undergone a dramatic transformation to become a leader in patient safety and operational efficiency. What happened?

The transformation is really one of change in culture. Our goal is to be in the top decile nationally in every aspect of the practice of medicine and delivery of care to patients, whether that's patient satisfaction, quality of medical care; whatever it is, we want to be in the top decile nationally. So when you have that as your goal, your culture starts to change.

How did the change start?

We were able to bring in some really fine physicians. Good doctors want to come to a good hospital, and that has helped us. I told the medical staff when I took this position that we would practice university quality medicine at a community hospital. They've heard me say this a million times.

What about board involvement?

The other part of our transformation was our board of directors, who realized back in the early 2000s that we had to

change everything we did to make this a first-class hospital. So what we did is develop a focus on patient satisfaction. The other thing we realized is that we had to be very efficient, not cost-saving efficient.

How did improvements in the emergency department start?

I remember when (President and CEO James) Collins was new at the job – this was before our emergency room was changed – and he said the emergency room has to be fixed. We said, Jim, that's just the way emergency rooms are. And he said, not here. And that was the beginning of realizing that there was a different way to do it at St. Clair. We fixed the emergency room and became the No. 1 emergency room in the country for patient satisfaction because of those two words: "not here."

What were the emergency department's problems?

The quality of care was good, but the patient satisfaction was horrendous. Patients were never happy after being down there so many hours. It's not like that down there any more. We knew we needed a new and larger emergency room, but we were not going to expand our emergency room to have all the same problems that we had. Just making it larger wouldn't solve the problem. We had to improve every aspect of our care.

How would you define quality improvement at St. Clair?

It's a daily, hourly search and struggle to do everything right every time. That's the culture at St. Clair. Our culture is wanting to be the best so we just continue to improve.

What was the hardest part of St. Clair's transformation?

The hardest part was getting people to realize that things don't have to be this way, that it's just not the way it is.

What do you do in your downtime?

I officiate high school basketball. I see patients. I still practice. I take care of about 300 to 400 patients, and I make my own rounds in the hospital, so that keeps me pretty busy. It's an old-style practice where the doctor knows the patient. I still make house calls. I know most of my patients' phone numbers, quite honestly. My wife helps me with that – she's been wonderful. We've been married 44 years. Medicine has been a vocation to me. I don't know what I would do if I couldn't take care of people.

– Kris B. Mamula

