

## Tulsa's 'grand experiment'

### OU School of Community Medicine the latest chapter

At first blush, Tulsa might not be considered the likeliest spot to reinvent health care. But even a cursory look at what's been going on around here suggests otherwise:

- ▶ Oklahoma ranks 47th in the nation in physicians per capita, and "without intervention, Oklahoma will most likely further lose ground" on that front (U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration).

- ▶ Oklahoma ranks 47th in the nation in health status measures (United Health Foundation, 2007).

- ▶ Oklahoma ranks last in the nation in health status, equity in health, avoidable hospitalizations and cost (The Commonwealth Fund, June 2007).

We could go on and on. In fact, we have, on numerous occasions, alluded to these system ailments on these pages.

Obviously something more needs to be done.

Enter Tulsa's often-acclaimed cadre of public and private do-gooders, who partly out of altruism and largesse, and partly due to the extreme needs, have met first one, and then another crisis head-on.

"This is all because of the health status of Oklahoma," says Dr. Gerry Clancy, referring to the nation's first School of Community Medicine about to be launched right here in river city.

Clancy, president of the University of Oklahoma Tulsa branch, along with staff at the George Kaiser Family Foundation and other key stakeholders, has been working on this concept for years now. After arriving here from Iowa several years ago to serve as dean of the Tulsa-branch of the OU College of Medicine, he quickly noticed some of the region's glaring health disparities:

- ▶ Since the 1980s, age-adjusted death rates declined throughout the U.S., except in Oklahoma, where they have risen;
- ▶ Blacks in Tulsa County face a



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productive lifespan that is on average 14 years shorter than other county residents;

- ▶ The infant mortality rate for African-American babies born in Tulsa County is more than twice that of whites, Indians and Hispanics.

- ▶ For every doctor in north, east and west Tulsa, there are 26 in midtown and south Tulsa.

Despite these glaring disparities, the number of doctors being trained across the U.S. has not increased; what's more, doctors now spend less time on health care and more time on administrative chores.

What to do? In simple terms, change radically how doctors are selected and trained so that they will want to address such disparities.

"The most altruistic person in the medical pipeline is the first-year med student. They are driven," said Clancy.

But by about the third year of training, "that notches down and it doesn't come back up. They become jaded very, very quickly."

So, he reasoned: Why not select physician candidates with a strong commitment to public health, and reinforce that commitment throughout their training?

The new OU School of Community Medicine aims to do just that. Carefully selected students will be steeped in community health-care issues and experiences from day one, through a system of 17 community clinics serving 34 sites and collaborations with 80 different agencies.

This training will contrast sharp-



STEPHEN PINGRY / Tulsa World

Mayor Kathy Taylor (left) and University of Oklahoma President David Boren look on as George Kaiser discusses the \$50 million gift for the OU School of Community Health.

ly with that received by doctors-to-be in Oklahoma City, where training is generally limited to the OU hospital complex.

A \$50 million grant from the Kaiser foundation will help fund scholarships, endowed chairs and salaries for the Tulsa plan.

Over time, the Tulsa community medical school will produce doctors, physician assistants and other providers with a strong commitment to addressing the specific health-care needs of the region. "We think it's going to take at least a generation of physicians to make a significant impact, because some of these problems are so complex," said Clancy.

Thanks to efforts such as this one, Tulsa's health-care landscape

has been transformed in a dizzyingly short period of time, though significant challenges obviously remain. Collaborations among educational institutions, health-care providers, branches of government and the philanthropic sector have in some ways made Tulsa the envy of many other communities.

But that shouldn't be a reason for state leaders to stand by, once again, and let Tulsa go it alone. The ambitious OU-Tulsa plan will require some state assistance. So will any arrangement to preserve the residency programs for the Oklahoma State University Center for Health Sciences, whose training hospital faces an uncertain future.

Does Oklahoma really need both medical schools? In a word, yes.

Even with two, the supply of doctors is steadily dwindling. But if plans continue evolving, OSU could serve as the primary hospital for indigent care in this region, while OU continues to refine non-hospital care — primary, prevention, diagnostic and outpatient — through its extensive system of clinics. And there are opportunities for further collaboration between the two medical schools.

Tulsa has quickly become an integral part of the health-care future for the entire state, indeed for this region of the country. It would be shameful — no, it would be immoral — to refuse to play a part in this grand experiment.

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## What's old is new again

### 1968 and 2008: Similarities despite 40 years of separation

A lame-duck, unpopular president, a controversial war, a reeling economy, an energized young voting bloc and a divisive racial issue.

Sound familiar? It's this year, right? Well, yes and no.

All those things are relevant this year. But they also describe 1968 — 40 years ago.

Whether 2008 will usher in a "summer of love" similar to the 1967 summer version is doubtful. There's not much love going around these days.

In 1968, President Lyndon Johnson was the lame duck, announcing that he would neither seek nor accept the nomination of the Democratic Party for another term. He was eligible. He had assumed the presidency following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963. He was elected president in 1964 and could have run for a second full term.

But the increasingly unpopular Vietnam War, the relentless pressure from a politically energized youth movement, challenges within his own party and a rising body count in a war across the world helped drive him from office.

In 2008, President George W. Bush is not choosing to relinquish the office, he has served the maximum two terms. Nevertheless, he is a lame-duck president and it's showing with some cracks within his own party and in Congress.

As it was 40 years ago, a war is playing a big part in this year's presidential election. Although the body count is far less than Vietnam's (almost 4,000 in more than four years, compared with Vietnam's total of more than 58,000 over almost 16 years), it weighs heavily on the minds of most Americans.

In 1968, then Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon hinted of a "secret plan" to get the U.S. out of Vietnam. Most voters,



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including some young ones, bought into the plan and elected him.

That sent American politics into a crash-dive involving the Watergate scandal and the resignation of Nixon. The country didn't recover from that until Ronald Reagan introduced us to "it's morning in America."

Nixon crushed Democratic presidential candidate Sen. George McGovern in 1972. Ironically, Nixon's "secret plan" eventually turned out to be McGovern's not-so-secret plan. He simply pulled out and left Vietnam in chaos.

Even with the concerns over the war in Iraq, this year's presidential race might end up much like the campaign that elected President Bill Clinton — "It's the economy, stupid."

Americans are facing what could be a crippling recession. Going hand-in-hand with the economic worries is the health-care issue. Too many Americans — including millions of children — are without health insurance, either due to poverty or choice.

As in 1968, and for some of the same reasons, younger voters are paying attention. Many have been enthralled by the campaign of Sen. Barack Obama, much like the young voters who worshipped first John Kennedy and later Bobby Kennedy, and have helped him win crucial primaries and caucuses.

Whether that dedication will hold up over time remains to be seen.

Just as the civil rights movement



Associated Press file

President Lyndon B. Johnson greets soldiers at Cam Ranh Bay, South Vietnam, on Dec. 23, 1967.

fought its way through the 1950s and 1960s, another racial issue faces America. The illegal immigrant controversy continues to play a pivotal role in the presidential campaign.

There are many Americans legitimately concerned with the issues surrounding illegal immigration, its effect on the economy and social services. And the entire thorny issue deserves fair debate and a fair resolution.

But make no mistake, there is an underlying thread of xenophobia and, yes, racism that has been cap-

tured by radicals on the right and those putrid elements have permeated this presidential campaign.

It took courage and dedication by people such as Rosa Parks, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., John Hope Franklin, Thurgood Marshall and others to stand in the face of racism and secure the rights granted by the Constitution for a portion of our population that had for too long suffered. And it took a president from the South to force through the Voting Rights Act of 1964 that was a monumental step toward equality.

The illegal Hispanic immigrants, of course, were not dragged here and placed into slavery, but the mistrust and hatred some people show toward them is not far removed from the humiliation that African-Americans endured for more than three centuries.

Forty years ago young people embraced recreational drugs, dropped out and turned on and changed society in many ways — some for the good, some for the bad. The word "unisex" cropped up, which worried some Depression-era parents as much as LSD.

Among other things, 1968 was the year of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, the My Lai massacre, the Columbia University uprising, the assassinations of King and Robert Kennedy, the riots at the Democratic Convention in Chicago, the first manned flights in the Apollo space program and the power-salute protest by two black U.S. athletes at the Summer Olympics in Mexico City.

Depending on your perspective the world was either coming to an end or about to get better. That sounds familiar, too, doesn't it?

But things have a way of evening out. For goodness sakes, one-time rebel Dennis Hopper has turned Republican (or maybe he always was) and is now hawking financial planning on TV ads and Jane Fonda (of "Barbarella" and "Hanoi Jane" fame) has found Jesus.

Just as in 1968, we have our set of serious problems to iron out. And, like 1968, some of those old problems will linger far too long.

Forty years ago seems like a long time and it's quite possible that 40 years from now someone (not me) will be making the same comparisons.

By the way, peace, man.

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