

Posted on: Monday, March 28, 2005

BUSINESS

Leadership Corner: J. David Curb, M.D., M.P.H.

Interviewed By Catherine E. Toth
Advertiser Staff Writer



Name: J. David Curb, M.D., M.P.H.

Age: 58

Title: President, chief executive officer, medical director

Organization: Pacific Health Research Institute, a private, not-for-profit research organization

that conducts clinical trials, has about 120 employees and an annual budget of about \$10 million.

High school: Sandia High School in Albuquerque, N.M.

College: Bachelor of science in zoology, University of Colorado; medical degree, University of New Mexico; master of science in public health, University of Texas

Breakthrough job: Coordinating national clinical trials at the University of Texas right after medical school. "It was my first taste of big-time research, working with leaders in the field and people who determined policy," Curb said. "It was an eye-opener."

Little-known fact: While in medical school, Curb worked at Harrah's Lake Tahoe Casino counting money.

Major challenge: "Moving from the research arena to running a business."

Book recently read: "Presenting to Win: The Art of Telling Your Story" by Jerry Weissman. The book taught Curb how to present information in a way that's relevant and interesting to the audience.

Hobbies: Hiking, snorkeling and spending time with his two daughters. "I used to like to travel," Curb said. "Now a big trip is to the North Shore."

Mentor: The late Dr. Richard Remington, who persuaded Curb to do research instead of taking care of patients. (Curb had initially wanted to be a pediatrician.) "You're doing the same thing — helping people — but with very broad-reaching effects," Curb said.

Q. You took over Pacific Health Research Institute about eight years ago and expanded the business rapidly. Talk about the growth?

A. We've grown rapidly, by a factor of five ... We've had to move from a mom-and-pop model to a more traditional business model. We set performance goals for everyone. Even I have performance goals. That was a little foreign to the mom-and-pop model and moving there was a challenge. It was changing mindsets.

Q. How is growing a medical research industry important to the community?

A. The development of a life-sciences industry is part of the bigger picture for Hawai'i ... It's about keeping our kids in Hawai'i and in jobs that are well-paying and rewarding. We need jobs other than those in tourism and the military. Biotech should be the third leg on the stool. It's a shame we're losing bright kids to the Mainland.

Q. San Diego has been successful in establishing a biotech industry that has become an integral part of its economy. Do you envision that happening in Hawai'i?

A. Biotech companies can be a major source of income and jobs to a community, and San Diego is a great example of that. (The city) was able to build its biotech industry, which has revitalized the whole area there. Really, the idea is that Hawai'i could do the same thing.

Q. Is it difficult to convince people to invest in this industry?

A. Well, the concern is, I suppose, that it costs, it doesn't just happen. For better or for worse, we've invested \$150

million into the (UH) Medical School, and I'm not sure people are aware that that's just the first step. There needs to be sacrifices to get all the way there. People want other things ... But if Hawai'i wants to be where San Diego is in 10 years, we need to invest and keep investing. But there's a lot of competition for taxpayers' dollars.

Q. What attracted you to Pacific Health Research Institute?

A. I was trying to establish a research program at the University (of Hawai'i-Manoa) before Dr. Ed Cadman (UH Medical School dean). But there was no interest in large-scale research at the university, and that surprised me. I had come from a more traditional medical school environment where research was a large component (of the program). That (concept) wasn't totally foreign here, but there wasn't as much emphasis on research. At other medical schools there is much more of a marriage between research and education ... The tension is whether people are more interested in research or more interested in teaching. Finding balance is important. That kind of tension is not easily resolved.

Q. With the new biomedical complex opening in Kaka'ako, have attitudes toward research changed?

A. There has been a dramatic change in the direction of the medical school. I think the community and the university have bought into it. But it is a state university system bureaucracy, so change takes time.

Q. What are your short- and long-term goals for Pacific Health Research Institute?

A. The Iraq war has changed domestic spending in the U.S., so my short-term goal would be to work harder to access federal funding. Long-term, we have to diversify the things we do. I'd like (PHRI) to become part of the emerging biotech industry here and integrate what we do with the life-sciences industry. Since we've been very successful accessing federal funds, we have very skilled people here a few steps ahead of everyone else. We think we could use that to help other biotech companies to develop and grow faster. It's a little different customer for us, but enlarging that customer base is important.

Q. Do you think the public has any misconceptions about medical research or the life-sciences industry?

A. I think sometimes people think those guys (in medical research) are trying to further their own careers to make a dollar. But the truth is there are very few people whose primary goal is that. Everybody in our organization wants to help people and see the greater good out of what we do. Most of them see themselves as helping their children and grandchildren live a better life. If we don't have people like that, we can't build a better future.