A Message to the Community on UMC, the University of Arizona College of Medicine and the Future of Patient Care in our Community

The following has been submitted to the Arizona Daily Star

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There has been much discussion in our community over the last few days regarding issues surrounding the next steps in the merger and integration of UMC and UPH into the UA Healthcare.

The efforts by the Arizona Board of Regents (ABOR) and the new UA Healthcare board have been driven by a shared goal: to create a new model that sets the standard for a 21st Century academic medical center. We firmly believe that Arizona deserves a world-class academic medical center, not one based on a model from the 1980s. That is why for the past two years there have been extensive and public conversations about the development of this new enterprise - one designed to improve patient care, better facilitate academic medical research, attract the great physicians that our community needs, and enhance medical education for Arizona.

There has been much commotion following a vote on April 8 by ABOR. Ridiculous assertions were made about it somehow being a "hostile takeover"; a "money grab"; that it would put the hospital at "financial risk"; or that ABOR was "micro-managing" a separate organization.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

The notion of it being a hostile takeover is absurd - it has been under discussion by all the parties. Rather than micro-managing, ABOR's role is to set a strategic vision and to fulfill their fiduciary responsibility to protect state assets.

With respect to financials, this merger will save tens of millions of dollars annually, greatly improving efficiencies between the physician group and the hospital, and thus patient care. The only transfer of funds between the hospital and the College of Medicine will be to reimburse services rendered by faculty physicians and residents, and to share in the cost of physician recruitments.

So what, exactly, were the actions that ABOR took? They voted to recommend that UA Healthcare join them in making sure that the new CEO of the merged organization be a physician, in addition to being a topnotch business person. This is critical, because the CEO has to be someone who is supported and respected by the physicians that he or she will lead; it has to be someone who understands their challenges and opportunities.

They also asked UA Healthcare to support a reporting structure that brings the CEO closer ties to the University. The medical center was created in 1967 as UA's teaching hospital. It is UA's physicians who work there, and UA medical students who learn there. Having a CEO with oversight for all the areas that connect to the medical enterprise is the model that exists at the vast majority of successful academic medical centers.

Finally, they voted to complete a long agreed to commitment to slightly reduce the size of the UA Healthcare board. This had been proposed as a matter of organizational efficiency.

Everything that ABOR did was designed to sustain a better, more robust academic medical center.

Because a few individuals were successful in raising a political firestorm around the vote, ABOR made the wise decision to slow down the process and provide more time for public conversation. This is a good step which will allow the community to become better informed about the
Arizona.

In the end, what ABOR and the UA Healthcare Board are committed to do is ensure that Tucson has a stable, world-class academic health center that provides the best patient care anywhere. I think that is a goal we can all embrace.