Atul Gawande seeks to make medicine ‘Better’

Foundation Banquet 2009 draws record crowd

Celebrating 40 years of the medical school. A major gift announcement. A nationally recognized speaker.

These were the highlights of the 28th Annual University of Nevada, Reno Foundation Banquet, which turned its focus to health sciences this fall when a record audience of nearly a thousand people came out to honor the University of Nevada School of Medicine’s 40th anniversary at John Ascuaga’s Nugget in Sparks.

In his opening remarks, Joe Bradley ’78 (economics), chair of the University Foundation board of trustees, recognized the contributions of many over the years who have helped make the medical school successful, as well as those who continue to support it with their gifts of time and financial support.

“We celebrate the legacy that began 40 years ago when the University of Nevada School of Medicine was born,” Bradley said. He referenced the two new medical buildings that are under construction and those who came forward to donate to the cause of educating Nevada’s future health care professionals.

University President Milton Glick delivered the big announcement of the night when he revealed that the William N. Pennington Foundation committed $10 million for the purpose of the planned Health Sciences Building, which will allow for the eventual doubling of both the nursing and medical student class sizes when it is complete in the fall of 2011. The building will be named the William N. Pennington Health Sciences Building and will sit just east of the current Pennington Medical Education Building. The gift completed the private fundraising effort for the facility, which also received a $31 million bond from the state Legislature.

“This building will allow us to train doctors and nurses together in a state-of-the-art, interdisciplinary facility,” Glick said.

He also mentioned the gifts from the Nell J. Redfield Foundation and the Thelma B. and Thomas P. Hart Foundation and the many people and organizations that helped the University reach its $15 million fundraising goal toward the building.

Glick also noted the construction progress of the Center for Molecular Medicine, the School of Medicine’s newest research facility in 30 years, which is funded in part by research dollars generated by University faculty members. The Center for Molecular Medicine will open in the fall of 2010 and is clearly visible on the north end of campus. In addition to School of Medicine basic science research programs, the center will also house the Center for Aging and the Whittemore Peterson Institute for Neuro-Immune Disease.

Glick recognized Dr. George Smith, the founding dean of the medical school who was in attendance, and former Nevada legislators Joseph Dini ’51 (business administration), Virgil Getto and Donald Mello, all of whom had a substantial role in establishing the medical school in 1969.

Distinguished surgeon, teacher and writer Dr. Atul Gawande, staff member of Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston, gave the keynote address and began by jokingly apologizing for telling surgery stories during dinner.

Gawande said the challenge for the medical profession today is to make the medical experience better for patients who have long been struggling within the current system. He has published a book on this topic: Better: A Surgeon’s Notes on Performance.

“Medicine is now very complex and uncertain. Managing the complexity of what needs to be done overwhelms our ability to handle it,” he said. These statistics show that delivery of medicine is now very complex and uncertain.

“Managing the complexity of what needs to be done overwhelms our ability to handle it,” he noted.

Gawande suggested that patients would be better served if the medical community could find a way to make “the bell curve of doctors” look more like a shark fin, with most patients getting exceptional care, thus compressing the bell curve, rather than most getting care in the average range. The best physicians are not always the most expensive, he noted, citing the often high cost of physicians at the low end of care.

Gawande told the story of a fellow physician, Dr. Warren Warwick, director of the Fairview-University Children’s Hospital’s cystic fibrosis center in Minnesota, who took the time to ask questions of a teenage patient to learn why she wasn’t taking her medication for cystic fibrosis. Warwick then recommended a little bit of rebellion—defying her school’s orders to have a nurse administer all medications—as well as reliance on friends and family to help get herself back on track.

He also urged the practice of holding weekly team meetings so that each medical professional involved with the care of a patient knew what his and her colleagues were doing. Developing simple procedural checklists goes a very long way in reducing errors in patient care and increasing survival rates, Gawande said.

“Give time to your patient; then give time to your profession,” Gawande urged the audience. He suggested being curious about those at the top of one’s field, and then rewarding those who seek out those at the top.

He said changes in health care in America must be addressed community by community and the payment mechanism needs to be revised so that physicians are rewarded for taking time to talk with patients, as Warwick did.

The current debate over government versus private health insurance doesn’t matter, he said, because insurance options don’t influence how well a patient responds. “How my team
interacts with the patient does influence how he responds,” he said.

Gawande said he sees the future of medicine in communities around the country, including here at the University of Nevada School of Medicine where the decision to train nurses and doctors together as a team is moving forward. To describe the current method of training health care professionals, he offered the analogy of a basketball team training all its point guards independently from the centers and forwards, and then throwing them together as a team on the court and expecting success.

“I did not come to Nevada expecting to see the future … thank you for showing it to me,” he concluded.

The foundation banquet was supported by its sponsors including the Whittemore Family Foundation, the E.L. Cord Foundation, John Ascuaga’s Nugget, Ann Carlson ’59 (business), ’78 M.Ed., Ron Turek, International Game Technology, NV Energy, the Reno Gazette-Journal and Jane Witter.

**Susan Desmond-Hellmann ’78, ’82M.D. honored as School of Medicine’s Outstanding Alumna**

The University of Nevada School of Medicine Alumni Chapter honored one of the school’s most notable and accomplished alumna, Susan Desmond-Hellman, ’78 (premedical)/’82M.D., with the inaugural Outstanding Alumni Award on Sept. 24 at a reception prior to the 28th Annual Foundation Banquet.

Upon accepting the award from Louis Bonaldi, ’75 (biology), ’77A.A.M.D., president of the School of Medicine’s Alumni Chapter, Desmond-Hellmann said she felt like she was queen for the day.

“I’m proud to be a member of the Class of 1982 and hope to continue to serve you well in my new job,” said the recently appointed chancellor of the University of California, San Francisco.

Following her undergraduate and graduate studies at Nevada, she completed her clinical training at University of California, San Francisco and is board-certified in internal medicine and medical oncology. She also holds a master’s degree in public health from the University of California, Berkeley.

Desmond-Hellmann has had a remarkable career in the biotech industry and was the president of product development at Genentech until her appointment as chancellor of the University of California, San Francisco earlier this year. She has served as an associate adjunct professor of epidemiology and biostatistics at University of California, San Francisco, volunteered her time and expertise on numerous boards, and was listed among *Fortune* magazine’s Top 50 Most Powerful Women in Business in 2001 and from 2003 to 2008.