

Health system CEO listens to doctors. He has to—they're his family.

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Ketul J. Patel, CEO for the Virginia Mason Franciscan Health system headquartered in the Puget Sound, has the “MHA” and “MBA” degrees after his name—not “MD” or “DO”—but he has spent his whole life closely observing the health care field.



Born in Kenya to a physician father and nurse mother, Patel was eight years old when his family moved to the U.S. in 1979 and settled in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. While his brother Himanshu became a doctor like their internist father, Ketul followed a different professional path while staying in the health care field.

“I always wanted to be a doctor growing up and I went to Johns Hopkins as a pre-med thinking I wanted to be a physician,” Patel said.

A combination of not feeling excited by chemistry and biology classes and advice he received while working as a research assistant to Christian Anfinsen, PhD, one of the winners of the 1972 Nobel Prize for chemistry, made him realize there were other opportunities available.

“One piece of advice he gave me was: Always follow where you think your skills are going to lend best,” Patel recalled, adding that, after taking graduate-level health administration classes as an undergrad, “I just found my way in that path.”

That path has taken him to Seattle and Virginia Mason Franciscan Health (VMFH)—an AMA Health System Program member.

In addition to being the CEO of VMFH, Patel is also the Pacific Northwest division president of VMFH’s parent company, CommonSpirit Health, which was formed through the alignment of Dignity Health and Catholic Health Initiatives (CHI). He was working as the CEO of CHI Franciscan Health in Tacoma when CHI Franciscan and Virginia Mason merged and he shared the VMFH CEO role with Gary Kaplan, MD, until December 2021.

“When I came to CHI Franciscan in 2015, it was a very strong community hospital system, which had more than 1,000 physician and non-physician providers, and had tremendous geographic scale,” Patel said. “Anchored in Tacoma, we reach all the way into the Olympic Peninsula, and into the shadows of Seattle—but not into Seattle.”

In December, the Leapfrog Group named the Virginia Mason Medical Center one of the top 149 hospitals in the nation for excellence in patient safety and quality of care based on medication safety, surgical outcomes, infection rates and other similar metrics. In the fall, Leapfrog gave the facility an “A” grade for hospital safety for the 20th consecutive time. Four of the system’s other hospitals also received consecutive “A” grades.

Virginia Mason’s history as a quality leader and its geographic location made it an attractive collaborator for CHI Franciscan in joint ventures that eventually led to the merger and the creation of the 11-hospital system with more than 300 sites of care.

“We felt that we needed to have a partner in the greater Seattle Metro area and there’s no other system that, in my view, was better than Virginia Mason—exceptionally strong quality outcomes, exceptionally strong safety outcomes,” Patel said.

“Their patient experience journey and story were like no other that I’ve seen in my career,” he added. “And, obviously, having geographic presence in downtown Seattle was truly significant for us.”

Physicians have always had his ear

Through it all, he’s had his parents and his brother, now the head of adult cardiac surgery for the University of Michigan Health System, offering guidance.

“I’ve got two very big voices that have always been in my ear,” Patel said. “I think I’ve really benefited from having all these clinicians around me, giving me advice.”

For the past year, he’s also received valuable insights from Dr. Kaplan.

“Gary’s an industry icon, and he set the platform around focusing on quality,” Patel said. “The phrase that he’s always used is: ‘If you had a family member coming into your organization, are you creating the experience that you’d want your family member to have?’ And that just speaks volumes about who he is.”

While having two CEOs is not the norm, Patel explained that VMFH makes wide use of the dyad system where physician leaders are paired with administrators in developing plans and programs.

“This way you’re not putting the physicians against administrators,” he said. “You have physicians collaborate with their administrative dyad partner and share goals and focus on results. They’re not in silos.”

Focusing on staffing and access

The stress of the COVID-19 pandemic has created concerns of adequate staffing throughout health care and VMFH is not immune. This has become the subject of Patel’s short-term focus—with the solution being to continue Virginia Mason Franciscan Health’s long-term strategy for recruiting and retaining employees.

“We need to make sure we create the right culture where people are going to want to work and continue to work for many years,” Patel said. “People come and work in places where they feel like they’re part of decision-making and part of the fabric of the organization. We want to continue to build that culture.”

A long-term focus is working toward health equity and access, work that the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia began when they opened St. Joseph Hospital in Tacoma in 1891.

“During the pandemic, we found there’s tremendous inequities in terms of access to health care,” Patel said. “Over 130 years ago, our sisters made the journey from Philadelphia to Tacoma to open up health care facilities to care for those that were in need and vulnerable.

“The pandemic has showcased that there are tremendous opportunities for us to close the gap in terms of health care access, and that is a key part of our journey at Virginia Mason Franciscan Health—to continue to increase access to care for those populations that have the biggest need,” he added. “That’s something our board is focused on, and that’s certainly something I—as the CEO—am going to be focused on.”