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Dr. Allison Brashear, the dean of the University at Buffalo Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, worked for 14 years as a practicing neurologist, educator and researcher who has made major contributions to treatment for some rare but extremely debilitating conditions.

Jacobs dean leads school to new levels of patient care

Allison Brashear's odds of growing up to be a doctor were pretty high. Her father was a lung doctor and her mother was a marriage and family therapist, so she often heard conversations about patient care in their Indiana home.



JANET GRAMZA

"I grew up hearing about how important it was for patients to be involved in their own care," Brashear said. "In school, I decided that I wanted to be a doctor who interacted with patients to keep them healthy throughout their lives."

Brashear ended up surpassing the odds by going into neurology, a medical field that's still 60% male. Two years ago, she became the first woman dean of the University at Buffalo's Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences at a time when only 24% of medical school deans are women.

At UB, Brashear also serves as vice president for health science, which includes not only Jacobs but UB's School of Dental Medicine, School of Nursing, School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences and the School of Public Health and Health Professions.

She says the job fits perfectly with her goal of patient care, which has expanded beyond individual care to include entire populations – especially those that have been denied health care due to race and economic status.

Brashear said she sought the job at Jacobs after two years as dean at the University of California – Davis School of Medicine because she and her husband wanted to move East to be close to their two adult children.

But she said what clinched the move to Buffalo were three goals she shares with UB – expanding research opportunities, filling gaps in care for disadvantaged communities and "diversifying the face of medicine" by recruiting more students and faculty from underrepresented groups.

"My job is to help keep people in Buffalo and the region healthy by training great doctors, having great, impactful research and providing great care so that everyone can thrive in our community," she said.



DEREK GEE, BUFFALO NEWS

University at Buffalo's Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences. About 70% of Western New York physicians are alumni of the school.

Focus on research

One of UB's biggest goals is to become a top public research university, and Brashear has the chops to lead medical research at Jacobs.

After graduating from DePauw University in Indiana with a bachelor's in chemistry, she went to the University of Indiana Medical School. By her third year she wanted to pursue neurology, but hesitated because of her dad's opinion that "Neurologists don't cure anything," she said.

During her residency in internal medicine at IU, she cared for the first HIV patient to be intubated at Indiana University Health Center in the mid-1980s. She said the process of helping that patient go from life support to recovering all his faculties underscored the role of neurological processes in every health function, she said.

She switched back to neurology via a two-year internship at Indiana that led to 14 years as a practicing neurologist, educator and researcher who has made major contributions to treatment for some rare but extremely debilitating conditions.

Her research on a rare involuntary movement disorder prevalent in one Indiana family led her to become an expert in the condition – called Rapid-onset Dystonia-Parkinsonism – and the genetic mutation that causes it and other rare neurological disorders.

Brashear has received continuous National Institutes of Health funding for her research since 2008. She's also

in the medical history books for leading a study that showed botulinum toxin – aka Botox – could relieve muscle spasms in stroke patients, a discovery that changed how spasticity and dystonia are treated.

After Indiana, she spent another 14 years as a neurologist, professor and researcher at Wake Forest University School of Medicine in North Carolina, then served two years as dean at UC Davis before coming to UB.

Her standing as a researcher meshes with UB's goal to double its federal research funding in the next five years. This past year, UB Jacobs reached \$74 million in research awards – a fifth of UB's total research expenditures – with 177 new grants.

Brashear recently hired Dr. Marc Halterman, former chair of neurology at the Renaissance School of Medicine at Stony Brook University, as her new senior associate dean and executive director for UB Jacobs' Office of Research.

Halterman is in the process of recruiting 13 new NIH investigators who are bringing their research labs to UB Jacobs, Brashear said. She used a line from Staples to describe Halterman's role: "to create an 'Easy' button for all of our new and existing investigators, which means facilitating applications for new and renewable grants, as well as having an entire team that is out there to find new opportunities to collaborate on research both inside and outside of UB," she said.

She also wants to expand

clinical trials to include more local and diverse patients. UB currently has more than 300 such trials, presenting opportunities for just about any patient to participate in studies that further scientific discovery and allow patients to benefit from new medicines and treatments being developed for a wide range of diseases, she said.

Expanding diversity and access

As was the case at Indiana, most of UB Jacobs' faculty members practice at area hospitals and health centers including ECMC, Kaleida Health, Catholic Health and the Veterans Administration. UBMD Physicians' Group, the practice affiliated with the Jacobs School, has launched UBMD Primary Care, which combines UBMD Family Medicine and the Division of Internal Medicine - Pediatrics of UBMD Internal Medicine to offer every facet of preventive care as the largest medical group in Western New York, Brashear said.

She said UBMD includes all of Jacobs' 635 physicians, who care for some 500,000 patients with nearly 850,000 office visits a year.

"More often than not, when you walk into ECMC you're going to run into a faculty member of the Jacobs School," she said. "If you go to the emergency room, you're going to be treated by a faculty member of the Jacobs School. About 70% of Western New York physicians are alumni of the school. So the

school is really interwoven into the fabric of the community."

That means efforts to recruit more diverse faculty and students will have big ripple effects, including more role models of color to inspire students to go into medicine and more doctors of color that patients from diverse backgrounds will relate to and trust, Brashear said.

She said UB Jacobs is building a core group of specialists to treat pediatric obesity and plans to invest \$4 million this year to aging research as part of Hochul's new state Master Plan for Aging. Both initiatives will address health disparities in Black and brown communities, which have higher rates of childhood obesity and diabetes as well as shorter lifespans than white communities.

Brashear has hired 100 new faculty in the last 18 months, many from diverse backgrounds and research perspectives. She also recently promoted two key staff members, Dr. Leslie Bisson as associate dean of clinical transformation and Dr. Fred D. Archer as associate dean for admissions.

She said Bisson will be in charge of transforming UBMD Primary Care and "the future of clinical medicine" at UB, while Archer is tasked with increasing diversity among students.

UB Jacobs' student body includes 845 residents and fellows, 720 medical students and 1,127 undergrads, students. Brashear said 23% identify as members of underrepresented minorities, "and that will increase."

Brashear said UB's most visible commitment to the entire community was relocating the medical school from its South Campus to Buffalo's downtown Medical Campus five years ago.

She said the move has inspired other providers like Best Self Behavioral Health to have more of a presence downtown. It also allowed UB to open its doors to a wider and more diverse community with events like its LBGTQIA+ Inclusivity in Health conference and its annual fall Igniting Hope conference, whose 2023 theme was "Building a Healthy, Just Community for All."

"I want the community to see the medical school as one of their resources," Brashear said. "I want them to feel that the medical school is really here to partner in their journey toward health."

Meet the Staff

The Buffalo Next team covers the forces reshaping the Buffalo Niagara economy.

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