Q&A With Chad Whelan, CEO of Banner - University Medicine in Tucson

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As CEO of Banner - University Medicine in Tucson, Chad Whelan oversees Banner - University Medical Center Tucson, Banner - University Medical Center South, dozens of clinics, the Banner - University Medical Group physician practice plan in Tucson and more than 6,000 Banner Health employees in Southern Arizona.

Whelan, who has been in his position since September, earned his medical degree from the University of Illinois at Chicago and completed a residency at the University of Minnesota, where he was chief resident. He also has a master's degree in health management and policy from the University of Michigan.

Whelan was a professor of medicine at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine and served as president of Loyola University Medical Center, where he was responsible for a 550-bed hospital and 25 ambulatory clinic sites with 700 employed physicians and 4,500 employees. His background also includes leadership and clinical roles at Loyola University Health System and University of Chicago Medicine.

In this Q&A, Whelan discusses his role and the future of Banner - University Medicine, which includes the opening of a $440 million hospital tower [1] at Banner - UMC Tucson in April.

Can you describe the difference between Banner - University Medical Center and Banner - University Medicine?

Banner - University Medicine is the academic division of Banner Health, and includes both Phoenix and Tucson. Banner - University Medicine in Tucson is made up of our two hospitals, Banner - University Medical Center Tucson and Banner - University Medical Center South, as well as the ambulatory network of clinics and physician offices operated by Banner - University Medical Group, the physician practice plan of the UA College of Medicine faculty.

Next month, Banner - University Medicine will open a beautiful, nine-story hospital tower at Banner - UMC Tucson. Four years in construction, this tower will not only transform the look and feel of the care experience, but also will house the most up-to-date technology so we can continue to provide care that is at the forefront.

You have said that Banner - University Medicine is building an "integrated health care delivery system." Can you explain what that means?

Traditionally, most of health care has been delivered by doctors practicing in clinics that they own and run. If someone needed to refer the patient for a specialist visit or for a diagnostic test, they would send them to a different clinic or testing area that is an independent practice or business. When a person becomes sick enough to need hospital care, the physicians
would admit them as a patient to a hospital that is operated completely separate from the clinics. This system creates discontinuity, confusion and duplication of testing.

At Banner ? University Medicine, we have the advantage that we can provide a seamless experience across the entire care continuum. From preventive and primary care to the most complex care imaginable and everything in between, it is all done by our doctors in our facilities as one care delivery system.

**Where does the academic mission fit in?**

The academic mission is critical. Banner ? University Medicine and the UA are partners not only in clinical care, but also in developing the clinicians of tomorrow and advancing the science and delivery of health care for Tucson, the state of Arizona, and beyond. Dean Irving Kron (interim dean of the College of Medicine ? Tucson) and I talk every day and are committed to creating a thriving clinical system to attract the best and the brightest trainees and faculty. Similarly, a robust and nationally known academic presence will attract clinicians and patients to Banner ? University Medicine. We are simply better together.

**As partners in running an academic medical center, what are Banner Health and UA Health Sciences doing well? What can be done better?**

While the Banner Health and UA Health Sciences integration is now a few years old, this is still very early on for a complex partnership such as this. There are certainly ongoing challenges in bringing together two very large, prestigious organizations with their own histories and cultures. However, there are some great examples of how together the two organizations are making great progress. Certainly, the investment in buildings and people across Tucson has been a tremendous win. The senior leadership teams of Banner and the UA have a unified vision for what Banner ? University Medicine will be. Locally, Dean Kron and I could not be more closely aligned with what we need to do to really make both organizations national leaders.

**It has been about four years since Banner Health's acquisition of the former UA Health Network and the signing of a 30-year Academic Affiliation Agreement between the UA and Banner Health. What have the results been so far?**

Clearly there have been some challenging times, and perhaps overly optimistic expectations on how quickly the benefits of the integration would occur. There have been significant bumps in bringing some of the systems together, most notably, the electronic health record conversion. Initially, significant numbers of faculty left because of the uncertainties inherent in these integrations. Also, we have experienced many leadership transitions in Tucson on both the Banner and UA side. While it is never reassuring to those going through it, these challenges occur in every integration as complex as this.
There have been some great successes as well, and they just keep coming. Banner Health’s investments in Tucson demonstrate a long-term commitment to this partnership. Over the past year, our systems have become far more stable; in order to meet the demand from patients, we have grown the number of faculty and providers faster than even planned with outstanding clinicians; and there is growing stability among the leadership teams on both sides. Our quality scores continue to show dramatic improvement, as do our patient experience scores, and I am confident that Tucson’s ability to access the care here will be transformed in the coming year.

Looking ahead four years, what do you hope to see?

In four years we will be hosting leaders from around the country to see how it is done: how we moved from a traditional university hospital and faculty practice plan that did not always find alignment to an academic integrated delivery system that benefits from being part of a regional health system providing an outstanding patient experience, excellent training for tomorrow’s clinicians, and a venue to perform impactful research.

The selection of UAHS and Banner Health to be part of the All of Us Research Program—a national precision medicine initiative managed by the National Institutes of Health—was a major coup.

It's the poster child for what will be coming through this partnership. Without each other as partners, All of Us would not be in Arizona. Yet, together, harnessing the research firepower of the UA and the clinical footprint of Banner Health, Arizona is far and away the most successful contributor to the All of Us program nationally.

UA employees have several options when it comes to choosing health care providers. Why do you think they should choose Banner? University Medicine?

There is no better place to get care. I have had the opportunity to practice medicine in some of the most highly ranked hospitals and clinics in the country and I know the care here cannot be beat. This is the only place in town where you can get care by UA faculty who are national experts in what they do. Sometimes people might think that these experts are only helpful when you have the most serious of illnesses. While we are expert in those areas, our faculty are also national leaders in what most people need most of the time: primary and preventive care, OB care, pediatrics and behavioral health.

We know we have had some challenges with how easy it has been to access our care at times. That is why we are so happy to roll out the Fast Pass program [2] for UA employees and their family members in Tucson this month. All they need to do is call 520-694-8888 and request “Fast Pass” and we will schedule an appointment with one of our providers within three business days.

And our new, $440 million hospital tower opening in April at Banner? UMC Tucson will set the standard for health care in Southern Arizona. Now we will have a state-of-the-art hospital as good as our physicians and staff. All private rooms, the latest technology, spectacular views? it will be a gift to the Tucson community and a stunning training ground for future generations of UA physicians, nurses, pharmacists and scientists.

I invite all UA employees to stop by for a preview tour of the new tower from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sunday, April 7. The tower will be the starting point for Cyclovia Tucson’s 3-mile, ride-and-
stroll route to the Warehouse Arts District. So, in addition to the tours there will be live music, food trucks, a rock climbing wall, zip line, giveaways, free smoothies and more. I hope to see everyone there!

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