A message from Dr. Peter Yellowlees, Chief Wellness Officer

Our uncertain times

If you are like me, you are probably feeling increasingly uncertain about the many changes going on around us. How can we plan for even the next six months?

COVID-19 seems to be resurfacing as the end of phase one. We all have to keep up our masking, social distancing and our many work- and home-related infection control and transmission reduction behaviors, as these will be the “new normal” over the coming months. No longer are they short-term.

Racial injustice and inequities in our country should now be evident to all, and thankfully are starting to be addressed by not just the Black and Indigenous communities, and other communities of color, but by groups like White Coats for Black Lives and many non-Black people like myself who have been self-educating. This must continue. We must all learn and take action.

Many people are worried about economics, jobs, financial losses and, in health systems, the continuing survival of a number of hospitals and clinics, after the closing of many small practices around the country in the past three months. At UC Davis Health, with our already recovered census, we are actually very well-positioned compared with many of our neighboring health systems, despite the pressures to provide more care in differing ways and uncertain circumstances. But it is difficult to be asked to do more in such uncertain times. It takes strength and persistence from everyone.
All of these concerns are valid, and all will be overcome eventually. We have to take the long view. As health care professionals we are made of strong stuff and we are used to finding solutions to difficult issues.

So today I want to feature two of our faculty who lift their colleagues and are an example to all of us as they demonstrate their strength and commitment to social and health care justice and helping our patients.

The first of these voices is an inspiring residency director, Associate Professor David Tom Cooke, MD, who is Head of the Section of General Thoracic Surgery and Program Director of the Cardiothoracic Surgery Residency, as well as Vice Chair for Faculty Development & Wellness in the Department of Surgery. On the UC Davis Health website his philosophy of care is described as his theme song, “Land of Hope and Dreams,” by Bruce Springsteen & The E Street Band.

Dr. Cooke’s clinical interests are general thoracic surgery, thoracic oncology, surgical treatment of malignant and benign esophageal disease, video-assisted thoracic surgery (VATS and Robotic surgery. His professional interests include mentoring, sponsorship and community involvement. His research interests involve clinical studies including oncologic trials, surgical outcomes/health services research, patient-centered outcomes research, surgical education and medical social media.

I asked Dr. Cooke about the recent events around injustice and racism. He was very instructive, saying: “Many of my colleagues and friends were shocked and horrified by George Floyd’s murder. Most African Americans were only horrified. I think I was shocked to learn that most people don’t understand that African Americans, regardless of socioeconomic status, live in a constant state of fear and dread. Many people who know me know that I often respond when individuals ask how I am able to not sweat the small stuff: ‘I am a Black man over 40. Which means I am either living on borrowed time or playing with house money.’”

Although the statement is meant to be in jest, Dr. Cooke feels it highlights the consistent stress many Black, Indigenous and other people of color are under.

Dr. Cooke sent me this New York Times article, which he said uncannily captures the feeling of many African Americans. I learned from the article. It is well worth reading.

Dr. Cooke is hopeful and feels if multiple stakeholders, from many demographics, take an active part to fight institutional racism large and small, our society will ultimately prevail. He points to some of the lyrics of that Springsteen song: “...this train, dreams will not be thwarted / This train, faith will be rewarded.”

And we finished with what he does for fun. He said: “I spend time with my wife Rachael, daughter Audrey, and labradoodle Sherman (named after Gen. William T. Sherman.” And here is a lovely photo of Dr. Cooke and his family hiking in Coloma along the American River.
Another of the exceptional people at UC Davis is Associate Professor Michael Campbell, MD. Dr. Campbell specializes in the surgical treatment of patients with thyroid, parathyroid, adrenal and pancreatic disorders, whose work with his patients during COVID has been both sensitive and outstanding, ensuring that patients who needed surgery most were operated on early.

So, I followed up with Dr. Campbell. He said: “COVID has created an incredible disruption in all of our lives. As an endocrine surgeon in the Cancer Center, the most difficult part of the pandemic from my standpoint was making decisions about balancing the time-sensitive surgical needs of my patients with the possibility that the hospital resources may become overwhelmed. Early on in the process we decided to call all of our patients that were awaiting surgery and talk them through the potential scenarios and get their feeling about moving forward with surgery versus postponing their case. This allowed us to triage patients with time-sensitive cancers and move them forward quickly, while delaying less time-sensitive cases without our patients feeling overwhelmed by the decision process. I couldn’t have done this without my outstanding nursing and administrative support from Michele Santos, James Small, and Michelle Pele.”

In light of national findings that COVID-19 disproportionately affects communities of color, Dr. Campbell went on to discuss the importance of correcting these health inequities, and how he plans to address this in his own research collaborations. He said: “During this time we also partnered with Dr. Veena Manja to win a UC Davis Cancer Center grant on the Opportunity Costs of Changing Cancer Care due to COVID-19. We hope to examine potential disparities in cancer care during this pandemic as well as physician and patient feelings toward cancer care during COVID-19.”

When I asked him about how his usual role had changed, like many people, he immediately turned to the issue many working families are facing: “The biggest change in my life has been trying to figure out with my wife how to continue our job responsibilities while helping our kids with their online schooling at home. This has been a unique opportunity for me to spend some
time working from home while brushing up on my middle school algebra. Jennifer, my wife, and I have two boys and two dogs. During the COVID epidemic, we have been spending time outdoors mountain biking and around the house working in our vegetable garden and landscaping. As a family we also enjoy backpacking, rock climbing, and snowboarding. The boys are involved in soccer and baseball, which keeps us busy when not in quarantine.”

And here is a lovely picture of the Campbell family.

Thank you, Dr. Cooke and Dr. Campbell, for your great examples of resilience, coping and leadership during these unprecedented times.
Pain Clinic ACC
“The staff at the Pain Clinic is exceptional. They are thorough and caring and the clinic is a well run ‘machine.’ People are moved through quickly and carefully and as much as I dislike the procedure, I always feel very cared for during my stay.”

Tower 4 ENT/Internal Medicine
“My readiness to be discharged was due to my great family support which staff noted. I could have stayed another night. I was given a choice!”

Emergency Pavilion
“The horrific trauma that my daughter had experienced and was seen for in ER could not have been handled in a more loving, compassionate, and gentle way. We are so grateful for the incredible staff at the UC Davis Emergency room for giving us some comfort during that time.”

East 6 Cardiothoracic
“My experience was excellent! The doctors, nurses, & staff were excellent and went beyond my expectations to accommodate. Words cannot adequately express my appreciation!”

Radiation Oncology Cancer Center
“I have always received fast, courteous care from the first day I came to UCD.”