



Dr. Levey's Legacy

In February 2010, Gerald S. Levey, M.D., stepped down as Vice Chancellor, UCLA Medical Sciences and Dean, David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. In 2009, one year after he announced his intention to step down, the MAA presented him with the **Award of Extraordinary Merit** for his leadership in academic medicine and private sector medical affairs.

As an internist and endocrinologist, he has conducted widely-known and applied research on the thyroid gland and heart. His proudest professional achievements include the planning and constructing of Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center – the world's most advanced medical facility, obtaining the Geffen endowment, and overseeing the building of five new research facilities.

Below find the complete interview that the MAA conducted with Dr. Levey:

When did you know you wanted to be a physician?

I was four years old. Samuel Rosenstein, M.D., was my family's physician. He was an amazing man of whom I was in total awe. In my mind, he was the human personification of God. Although he had an office, Dr. Rosenstein was recognized not only for his compassion, intelligence, and professionalism, but also for his house calls. He performed a number of medical and surgical procedures on me on the kitchen table – literally! I think what amazed me even more than his spectacular bedside manner and calm and reassuring demeanor was that ability to keep up with the science of the day. Once, when I was ill, he decided against using antibiotics because he had read in the medical literature that the bacteria become resistant especially if overused. This man was my role model, and I knew I wanted to follow in his footsteps. I don't remember ever wanting to be anything else in my life but a physician.

You have inspired a generation of physicians. Who inspires you?

The love of my life, Dr. Barbara Levey. We have been married 50 years and have two children and three grandchildren. Barbara and I met in our senior year at Cornell University. An outstanding student, she was a real pioneer. She went to State University of New York Upstate Medical School in Syracuse and was the only woman graduate in her medical school class of 120. She was able to overcome prejudices directed at women and reach the pinnacle of her specialty of clinical pharmacology. Barbara was an inspiration to me then and has continued to remain so. She has always done her best to see that I achieve all of my goals in life, including a geographic odyssey that neither of us could have predicted but helped us achieve our goals.

Your geographical odyssey to the Dean of the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA and the Vice Chancellor for the UCLA Medical Sciences included positions at the University of Miami School of Medicine, the University of Pittsburgh, and Merck. What about the opportunity at UCLA captured your attention?

My time at Merck was a fabulous experience. I learned to run a major organization by observing how the company was led by its CEO, Dr. Roy Vagelos. I began to dream about running a major academic medical center. The UCLA job was perfect because it included not only responsibility for the medical school, but also oversight of the practice plans and the hospital system. Then, Mother Nature rewrote the job description. The 1994 Northridge earthquake damaged the UCLA Medical Center beyond repair. It became clear that a significant portion of the job would be to oversee the building of a new hospital and new research facilities. And, as they say, the rest is history.

In summer 2011, your book, *Never Be Afraid to Do the Right Thing – A Leadership Guide in an Age of Change and Challenge*, was released. What was the source of the title?

The book is titled after my favorite business admonishment “do the right thing” and refers to decision making. I frequently advise members of my leadership team that more important than whether a decision turned out to be a correct one was whether it was the moral, ethical, and honest thing to do.

You devote an entire chapter of the book to jokes. Why does an effective leader need to have a good sense of humor?

A sense of humor is a very tangible and even critical attribute serving many purposes for a successful leader. Perhaps the most important is that it humanizes the leader when his or her sense of humor is revealed in the appropriate time, place, and context. Making people laugh, even in a time of crisis and tension, can relax the atmosphere in a room and enable the participants to hopefully reach better solutions. The leader of any major organization is called upon for multiple speaking engagements during the ordinary workweek and an abundant schedule of evening engagements with community and national organizations. It is good for the people in the audience to embrace the vision of the leader. Often using a funny story sets the proper tone.

What are important principles for an effective leader?

There are 16 principles listed in my book. Each one is important, but I would like to highlight eight:

- Surround yourself with high-quality achievers and acknowledge their successes.
- Be passionate and have a strong work ethic.
- Check your ego at the door.
- Set a high bar for your vision.

- Don't rush judgments or decisions.
- Admit when you are wrong and change direction.
- Adapt to meet unexpected events.
- The role of the dean is to fulfill the dreams of the faculty, staff, and students.

Now that your first book is launched, what are your current projects?

I am doing more student teaching. I have provided a lecture on leadership to our PRIME students, who are working to acquire the M.D. and M.P.H. degrees and who are required to have course work on leadership. I also provided a seminar on leadership to the scholars who are training in the Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Scholars Program. Beginning January 2012, I will be conducting a 10-week Fiat Lux seminar on leadership for 20 freshman students in the college. This experience should be challenging and stimulating.

I plan to begin work on my next book tentatively scheduled to focus on crisis management. This issue is particularly challenging for all leaders of large organizations and is a topic of great interest to leaders in academia, business, and government. I hope to complete this book in the second half of 2012 or early 2013. In the more distant future, I am pondering a book dealing with mentoring.

As Dean Emeritus, I am keeping myself productively occupied. I am particularly gratified that I can continue to contribute to the college and the school of medicine.