

Ex-cop enforces change at Scripps Health After major turnaround, CEO now leads system's expansion



Scripps Health Chief Executive Chris Van Gorder leads a leadership academy on the La Jolla campus. — John Gastaldo

BY R.J. Ignelzi

A police officer's job is to protect, direct and correct.

That isn't much different from the way Chris Van Gorder, a former policeman, sees his role as president and chief executive of Scripps Health.

"My job is to teach and set the direction," he said. "I need to hold everyone in the organization, myself included, accountable for doing what needs to be done."

Van Gorder, who made his unusual career switch after an accident in the line of duty put him in a hospital for nearly a year, has risen to national prominence for his performance at Scripps.

Since taking over 11½ years ago, he has turned around the once-troubled hospital chain and shepherded expansion on every front.

This year, its flagship hospital in La Jolla began a \$2 billion, 25-year project that will rebuild virtually the entire campus. San Diego philanthropist Conrad Prebys' \$45 million donation this week will kick off the redevelopment with a \$456 million cardiovascular institute.

Still, while you can take the man out of the police force, you can't take the policeman out of the man. He credits some of the techniques he learned as a cop for aiding him in the boardroom.

"As a policeman, you have to make quick decisions in the field. I've been able to utilize that skill in meetings to help calm down situations," said Van Gorder, 58, who served on the Monterey Park police force from 1976 to 1980. "Also, as a policeman, I think I became a better judge of people, and organizations are made up of people."

Those who know him say it's his people skills, along with the fact that he's never forgotten his roots, that helped him turn a hospital chain with more than \$23 million in debt into a \$3.2 billion health care system.

"He took a death spiral and transformed it, financially and spiritually," said Dr. Lawrence Kline, a Scripps physician since 1978 and board member from 2000 until 2006. "Chris listened to everyone, the physicians and the employees, and really tried to understand what we needed. He showed that his interests served everyone's interests."

When Van Gorder took over, Scripps was losing \$15 million a year and its medical staffs had voted no confidence in management. The turmoil was causing high employee turnover, and donors were threatening to withhold financial support.

"At that point, we were just thinking about survival," he said.

He based his turnaround plan on strengthening the relationship between doctors and management. He also devised a plan to tighten belts across the board.

"We focused on creating the right team and building relationships with the medical staffs and employees to enable them to be a more integral part of the system," he said.

Six months after Van Gorder took the helm, the chiefs of staff at all five Scripps hospitals took out a full-page newspaper ad expressing their support. This was the same group that had gone public with a no-confidence vote for his predecessor, Dr. Stanley Pappelbaum.

To make Scripps a successful player in the competitive hospital market, Van Gorder has focused not just on expansion and efficiency but also on what many consider the future of medicine. He emphasized cardiovascular care, for which Scripps Memorial La Jolla and Scripps Green Hospital recently received high national rankings from U.S. News & World Report.

Scripps has streamlined access to medical treatment at all of the hospitals' emergency departments so patients get care within about 30 minutes. And, the system is moving further into genomics to better define those genes that play vital roles in human health and disease.

Van Gorder's success doesn't surprise those who know him, in or out of the hospital setting.

"Chris is one of those guys who actually walks his talk," said San Diego Sheriff Sgt. Don Parker, coordinator for the department's Search and Rescue unit.

Van Gorder volunteers more than 1,000 hours a year to the unit and has achieved the rank of reserve commander, in charge of search and rescue volunteers and reserves, in addition to being a certified emergency medical technician.

Growing up, as one of three sons in a middle-class family from Alhambra, Van Gorder dreamed of becoming a police officer.

"My parents both grew up during the depression and did not even finish high school until they were adults since they had to work to care for their families. They always told my brothers and me that we had a responsibility to give back — to contribute in some way to the greater good — because we had been so lucky," he said. "So I made a decision that for my part in giving back I would become a police officer and I did."

But in November 1978, just two years after getting his badge, Van Gorder responded to a domestic disturbance call. When he arrived, a woman rammed her vehicle head-on into his patrol car, pinning him. Musculoskeletal injuries landed him in the hospital for nearly a year.

As the door closed on his police career, another one opened in health care. Los Angeles' Orthopaedic Hospital, which cared for him all those months, hired him as its director of safety.

"It was there that I found my passion," he said.

Early in his career, Van Gorder developed a tough-love management style demanding accountability and offering transparency.

"I tell people you can miss your targets once but you won't be around to miss them twice," he said. "We are paid to perform and hit our goals and not make excuses when things don't go right."

Van Gorder encourages employees at all levels to share information. If anyone has questions, he urges them to email him directly.

"We don't have secrets here," he said. "People will help you become successful if you tell them why you are doing things."

Employing those principles, Van Gorder formed the Scripps Leadership Academy in 2001. One day a month for a year, Van Gorder leads about two dozen managers in discussions, offers constructive tips and answers questions.

Each session features Scripps executives who share their insights with the class, giving them a clearer overview of the organization. At the end of the year, participants must complete a group project designed to better the system.

"Middle managers are the agents of cultural change," he said. "We're trying to knock down cultural barriers and work together under one umbrella culture, taking advantage of the best work practices to make a more efficient system."

Some of Van Gorder's practices at Scripps, including the Leadership Academy, have become models for other health care systems around the country, said Thomas Dolan, president and CEO of the American College of Healthcare Executives in Chicago, for which Van Gorder served as chairman for five years.

"Chris is an innovative and visionary leader," Dolan said. "To have such an inspirational individual as the chairman was great for the organization and for the individual (members)."

In 2010, Van Gorder went with a Scripps medical team to Haiti to assist after the massive earthquake. The group also had gone to Houston after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. As an EMT, Van Gorder was able to contribute clinically in a support role.

Scripps chief medical officer Dr. Brent Eastman says one of the greatest tributes Van Gorder ever paid him was to call him his partner.

"As a police officer, a partner means somebody you trust and who covers your back. A surgical partner has the same significance," Eastman said. "I'm proud to call Chris my partner. I don't think you can find too many CEOs or CMOs who can say that about each other. But we mean it."



Scripps Health Chief Executive Chris Van Gorder is volunteer commander with the Sheriff's search and rescue unit. This month in Alpine, he and other volunteers practiced their skills. — John Gastaldo

Scripps Health

Not-for-profit health care system

Facilities: Five acute-care hospital campuses; 23 outpatient centers and regional home health care services

Affiliated physicians: 2,600

Employees: 13,300

Expansion projects: \$456 million cardiovascular institute, \$185 million proton therapy facility, \$43.9 million radiation therapy center.

Chris Van Gorder

Position: Chief executive, Scripps Health

Personal: Age 58; married to the former Rosemary Treiger for 26 years; two sons in graduate school; lives in Carmel Valley.

Education: Bachelor's degree in political science and public administration from California State University Los Angeles; master's degree in hospital services administration from the University of Southern California; completed Wharton CEO Program at the University of Pennsylvania.

Professional background: Police officer, Monterey Park; safety director, Los Angeles' Orthopaedic Hospital; executive positions, Anaheim Memorial Medical Center, Little Company of Mary Medical Center in Torrance, and Long Beach Memorial Medical Center.

Hobbies/interests: Volunteers with Sheriff's Search and Rescue unit; photography; running or walking.

Leadership roles: Past chairman of the American College of Healthcare Executives; member of the California Commission on Emergency Medical Services; serves on U.S. Commission for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; board of directors, San Diego Regional Economic Development Corp. Named one of the nation's "100 Most Powerful in Health Care" by Modern Healthcare magazine, 2007, 2008 and 2009.