

EX-USF DEAN SETS A NEW AND BOLD VISION TO TRANSFORM WOMEN'S HEALTHCARE AND CLINICAL RESEARCH IN FLORIDA – PART II

An Interview with [Abdul Sohail Rao, M.D., M.A., D.Phil.](#)
Chief Executive Officer and Chief Research Officer
[The Institute of Women's Health of North America](#)

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Lisa Murray is a free lance reporter. She writes for many syndicated media outlets and is presently working on a series for a national business magazine interviewing healthcare executives in the Greater Tampa Bay area. This interview is part of that series and highlights the work that is being done by the [Institute of Women's Health of North America](#); the largest healthcare provider for women in the state of Florida. This interview was conducted in two parts; Part I addresses the transformational changes that [Abdul Sohail Rao, M.D., M.A., D.Phil.](#), Chief Executive Officer and Chief Research Officer is making in the Institute. Part II addresses Dr. Rao's contributions to improving healthcare in the Greater Tampa Bay area as a senior leader at [USF Health](#) and the bike incident which had the potential to undermine his legacy in this region.

MURRAY: In preparing for this interview, I also had the opportunity to talk with some of your colleagues at the [University of South Florida Health](#) and in the [College of Medicine](#). In particular, I want to ask you some questions related to the incidence at the [Johnnie B. Byrd, Sr. Alzheimer's Center & Research Institute](#). Would you be willing to discuss it candidly?

RAO: Yes, I will. I have never made any attempt to distort the facts and/or to present anything but what had really transpired.

MURRAY: When did you join USF Health?

RAO: In Spring 2006. I was the Vice Provost for Research and Dean, College of Graduate Studies at the [Middle Tennessee State University](#) prior to my joining USF Health.

MURRAY: What were some of the challenges and opportunities you faced when you joined USF Health?

RAO: When I joined USF Health, both its research and graduate education missions were languishing. It had a core group of very talented faculty but the commitment to excellence in these missions was lacking. The medical school was in the lowest tier of ranking among its peers in NIH funding. There were NO core research facilities, faculty recruitment and retention has been a continuing challenge,

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RAO, A.S.

there was no strategic focus in research and graduate education, and no concerted effort to enhance interdisciplinary collaboration and synergy. I had a very diverse [portfolio of oversight](#) and an equally complex task to accomplish.

MURRAY: What were the first few changes you made after your arrival at USF Health in 2006?

RAO: My ultimate goal was to indelibly weave the passion and commitment for cutting-edge discovery and innovation in the intellectual fabric of the Institution so that it informs and guides all our core missions and irreversibly changes the culture at USF Health. During my first three months at USF Health, I had numerous Town Hall meetings with the faculty, staff, and students and discussions with the leadership of both USF and USF Health. Ultimately, with input from all involved, we developed a bold strategic plan which I started to implement in March 2006. First and foremost was the establishment of a School of Biomedical Sciences within the College of Medicine. I served as the Founding Director of this School. All basic science departments were placed within this School as were the graduate programs. To enhance interdisciplinary research and instruction, we merged some of the basic science departments; established signature interdisciplinary research programs; started the systematic process of faculty recruitment; created productivity goals for existing faculty; initiated the process for establishing much-needed core research facilities; and started the process of both internal and external review of our graduate programs. I also initiated the process of making selective changes in the leadership within my programs which included recruitment and appointment of new Associate Deans and Directors of various missions and Institutes/Centers that reported to my office.

MURRAY: How successful were you in implementing and/or achieving these goals?

RAO: In our strategic plan, we had made a commitment to be among the top 50 medical schools in the U.S., in NIH ranking. This was a very bold statement since we were ranked 79 out of 126 medical schools at that time and our aspirational peers had formidable research infrastructure that we

"To make an irreversible cultural transformation in an institution, you have to change people's expectations and create an accountability matrix which is objective and clearly defined"

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acutely lacked. However, once I started implementing the strategic plan, there was no turning back. I had the support of the Board, the leadership at USF Health and majority of the faculty, staff and students. As anticipated, there were a handful of individuals who were opposed to these changes and I continued to make all efforts to convince them to join the team and become a catalyst for change rather than opposing the same. During my tenure at USF Health, I established over 13 core research facilities; revamped the

entire graduate program placing enhanced emphasis on quality in our Master's and doctoral programs; established a Division for Distance Learning to offer courses on-line; and recruited and/or retained >17 faculty including the Chair of the newly created Department of Molecular Medicine. We also created productivity benchmarks for our faculty which became an issue of some serious debate in the Institution. Working with the leadership of the medical school and with the Faculty Council, I was also intimately involved in making selective changes in our faculty Appointment, Promotion and Tenure policies so that they reflect our values and the enhanced commitment to quality research and

instruction. The bottom line was that mediocrity was a word of the past and nothing short of excellence was acceptable.

MURRAY: These are indeed remarkable accomplishments and perhaps the reason why you were not the most popular Dean at USF Health. What was your biggest challenge?

RAO: My role at USF Health was one of a "transformer" and a "change agent". When I was recruited to lead this change at USF Health, I knew that the stakes were high and that the risk of failure far outweighs that of success. That was precisely what excited me to come to USF Health. Frankly, I did not come to Tampa to be the most popular kid on the block but to be the most effective Dean in the Institution and to leave behind a legacy that would be self-perpetuating. My biggest challenge was changing the culture of the Institution. It was a community medical school with comparable aspirations. All of a sudden, we outlined and started implementing a bold vision which made many in the Institution uncomfortable. The reality is that if you are going to play with the big boys, you have to behave like one. I admit that the pace at which I was making sweeping changes was overwhelming but it was required since our peers (both present and aspirational) were relentless in their efforts to prevent us from achieving our goals. But look at the results. In Fall 2008, we accomplished our goal of being in the top 50 medical school in the U.S., in NIH funding...three years ahead of our established timeline. This accomplishment is worthy of special commendation for we did it during the period when NIH funding was declining or at best stagnant. We increased the quality of our graduate programs and significantly enhanced student recruitment and retention. During the LCME accreditation in 2007-08, the visiting team applauded the remarkable accomplishments that we had made in such a short duration in our research and graduate educational missions. These are not insignificant milestones and much credit goes to the faculty, staff, and students of USF Health whose hard work and unprecedented commitment was principally responsible for this outcome.

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MURRAY: From what I understand, the [Byrd Institute](#) was an independent Institution and was in constant public and private altercations with the University of South Florida. Tell us how you got involved with the Byrd Institute?

RAO: Yes, your observation is accurate. Until the Summer of 2008, the Byrd Institute was an independent entity with its own Board and governance infrastructure. It was however, located on USF campus in Tampa and was involved in research in the area of Alzheimer's disease and related memory disorders. These were also areas of clinical and research excellence at USF Health and it therefore created some justified consternation on the part of the leadership of the University and its faculty, staff, and students. However, in the State legislative session in 2008, Byrd lost its recurring appropriation which was quintessential for its existence. This unpredictable outcome prompted the leadership of both Byrd and USF to start a dialogue for possible integration of Byrd into USF Health. This culminated in the appointment by the Byrd Board of Dr. Steve Klasko, CEO, USF Health and Dean, College of Medicine as [CEO of the Byrd Institute](#). I was subsequently appointed by Dr. Klasko as the Chief Operating Officer of the Byrd Institute.

MURRAY: What were some of the steps you took as the Chief Operating Officer at Byrd?

RAO: The first set of priorities included negotiating a reasonable package for the outgoing CEO Dr. Hunt Potter. Dr. Potter was an excellent scientist and it was my unequivocal recommendation to the leadership of both Byrd and USF to continue to preserve his faculty appointment in the University. Both Dr. Klasko and I argued that he will be a great resource for the University community and his experience and expertise as a world-renowned Alzheimer's researcher will continue to bring credibility to this organization. I negotiated with him a reasonable package which I presented to Dr. Klasko for his approval. I was very pleased that working with Dr. Klasko and other leadership in the University, we were able to retain Dr. Potter and his graduate students in the University. The second most important and difficult task was to look at the finances of this organization. With the termination of recurring State appropriations and with the lack of any other sustainable source of income, it became very evident that with the current run-rate, Byrd will not be able to sustain its operations beyond 14-18 months. It was therefore the recommendation of the USF/Byrd Transition Team (of which, I was a member) to the Joint USF/Byrd Board and to Dr. Klasko to radically trim down the operating expenses of the Byrd Institute and to put in place some revenue-generating clinical programs for long-term viability of this entity. These recommendations included relocating and/or relieving >20 administrative employees (not scientists, students or other essential clinical staff) of their responsibilities in the Byrd Institute and drastically reducing other administrative overheads in the program. This also resulted in the establishment of a comprehensive clinical care center at Byrd which continues to provide clinical care and conduct cutting-edge clinical and translational research in patients with memory disorders.

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MURRAY: Did you end up eliminating these positions in the Byrd Institute?

RAO: As a Chief Operating Officer, I did not have the sole authority to eliminate positions without the prior approval of the CEO and the joint Byrd/USF Board. The CEO (Dr. Klasko) presented these finding to the Board and after much discussion they approved the financial plan which offered long-term viability of the Institute. In September/October 2008, the USF/Byrd Transition Team started implementing these recommendations and over 20 staff positions were eliminated at the Byrd Institute. It is important to note that the Department of Human Resources at USF undertook a herculean task of trying to find appropriate jobs for displaced individuals in the USF System and was very successful in accomplishing this goal.

MURRAY: I understand that you were allegedly accused of stealing a bicycle in February 2009. Is that true?

RAO: Yes, it is true that I was allegedly accused of stealing a bike that was worth <\$20. But the reality is that the bike was never stolen. When we eliminated these positions at Byrd, some displaced employees decided to leave Tampa for other opportunities and left their personal belongings in the Institute. I assumed that the 2-3 bicycles which were left abandoned in the loading area of the Byrd

Institute belonged to these displaced employees. A homeless African-American person by the name of Mr. Victor Waiters who lived in the vicinity of the University campus and with whom my family and I became acquainted through the community, requested to borrow the bike for a day so that he can get his ID cards from the local Department of Motor Vehicles. I allowed him to proceed but with a promise that he will bring it back the following day...which, by the way he did. So the reality is that the bike was never stolen but it was borrowed by a homeless person who brought it back as promised the following day.

"The reality is that the <\$20 bike was never stolen but borrowed by a homeless African-American person and it was returned the following day".

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MURRAY: Your explanation is similar to what I have learned independently from my interviews at USF and Byrd. I guess what needs further explanation is the fact that you were at the scene with your van in which Mr. Waiters loaded the bicycle. Why was the bike that you had loaned to Mr. Waiters loaded in your van?

RAO: After I permitted Mr. Waiters to borrow the bike, he called me in my office at Byrd and informed me that the tires do not have any air and that he needs some help. His statement confirmed my earlier assumption that the bikes have most likely been abandoned. He requested that when I leave, if I could load the bike in my van and drop him off at the nearby gas station so that he could fix the problem. Again, not having any motive other than helping a homeless man I acquiesced. It is noteworthy that as a COO, I was the one who was responsible for activating the security system in the building and was fully aware that my actions are being videotaped. Therefore, when you start to put the facts together you very quickly realize that it does not make sense. How could a person in my position who has donated hundreds of bikes to charity would attempt to steal a bike worth <\$20 for a homeless man?

MURRAY: I did not hear much about Mr. Waiters in the news or the fact that you had loaned the bike to a homeless African-American man. I called Mr. Waiters last week and spoke with him about this issue. He also seemed very perturbed that his statements which support your position were never released to the public. Why do you think this happened?

RAO: Lisa, I wish I had an answer for that question. I am a strong believer in doing the right thing and as a senior manager, I have always recommended what is right for the organization. On some occasions, recommendations that I have made after going through a very informed and deliberate process were not received favorably by the affected constituents. My mentor once said that if everyone is happy with you than you are not a good manager. I guess he is right. I am certain that some of my recommendations and the changes I implemented were not perceived as favorable by those negatively affected by the same.

MURRAY: When I spoke with your colleagues at USF, USF Health and Byrd, they lauded your innumerable contributions to the University and to the Byrd Institute. Some became emotional when they spoke of this incidence and indicated that it was politics at its worst. Do you think this is a fact?

RAO: I am very pleased to hear that my three years of selfless contributions to the University

continue to be recognized. I have always said and reiterate that USF Health is the principal entity in the USF System which has the potential to continue to raise the stature of the University. While driving the other day on I-275, I had a smile on my face when I saw a billboard declaring that USF has seen a 213%

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increase in research funding. I know for fact that working with my colleagues, the new programs that I had implemented, the faculty that I had recruited, the new core facilities that I was able to establish, and the innumerable other changes that I was able to make at USF Health were primarily responsible for this surge in funding. When I joined USF Health in 2006, the medical school with \$31 million/year in research funding was in

the lowest tier of NIH ranking. I am proud to say that despite continuous erosion in NIH funding, faculty at USF Health continued to get new awards and by Fall 2008 and during my tenure, the College of Medicine (with over \$90 million in awards) was in the top 50 medical schools in the U.S. in NIH funding. This is not a trivial accomplishment and it was only possible because of the hard work of the faculty, staff, and students at USF Health and the visionary leadership of Dr. Steve Klasko, CEO, USF Health and Dean, College of Medicine. I believe I have left an indelible legacy at USF as I have at all other institutions that I have so passionately served. No one and I mean no one can take this away from me.

MURRAY: You have avoided answering my question and therefore I am going to repeat it again. Do you believe that misrepresentation of facts were politically-motivated and/or had any racial or religious discrimination?

RAO: I am not sure what motivates people to misrepresent facts or to outright lie about an incidence. I can only tell you that this incidence did not happen the way it was portrayed by the press, that my interviews with the press were not communicated at all and/or distorted, and that I am pleased that the State found no credible evidence and dropped the case. I have lived in the U.S., for over 23 years and I am a very proud citizen of this country. I believe it would be immoral and unethical for people to discriminate on the basis of race, color, sex, or religion. Did it have any political motivation? That might be possible but I have no credible evidence that would prove (or otherwise) this statement. I believe that those who have been in leadership positions in academia understand what happened, recognize the factors that contributed to such an outcome and dismiss it as a frivolous and irrelevant event.

That would certainly be true for the members of the IWHNA Board and many of my colleagues at USF and elsewhere. I was concluding my negotiations with the IWHNA Board when this happened and after careful review, they dismissed the whole incidence as a sheer misunderstanding. I am certain that they did their due-diligence before offering me this position four days after the incidence. I am presently following with much intrigue the discussions that surround Mark Yudof, President of the University of California system and his tough decision to bridge the \$1 billion gap in the budget. Despite of the fact that his decisions reflect reality, he is probably the most

"I am not certain if there were any political, religious, racial, or ethnic discriminatory factors that prompted this outcome. What I am certain about is that the facts were distorted and falsified".

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embattled university administrator at the present time. I find his situation not too dissimilar to mine while I was at USF Health. You either look at the accomplishment of an academic leader or his/her popularity...in most cases, there exists an inverse correlation between the two.

MURRAY: Do you have any regrets about your role in this incidence and how it was portrayed?

RAO: Yes, I do. The very basic tenet of justice in the U.S. legal system (i.e., you are innocent until proven guilty) was completely ignored by ALL involved during the deliberations that followed this unfortunate incidence. I was tried and condemned in the court of public opinion before facts could be argued and/or presented. I regret that I was not given the opportunity to explain my position and when I was, that information was either distorted or miscommunicated. I also regret making an assumption that the bike in question was abandoned. I did however, apologize to the student (who by the way was concurrently an employee of Byrd and subsequently of the University) who owned the bike and his mentor (Dr. Potter, the previous CEO of Byrd) for making this assumption. I did this immediately after I learned that the bike in question belonged to him. I thought that both of them understood my position and the fact that I stand to gain nothing personally from this altruistic act of loaning the bike to a homeless man who by the way had returned the bike before I approached these individuals. Lastly, it would be very regretful if in the future, learned and informed individuals/institutions read these unsubstantiated stories and arrive at an unfavorable conclusion without learning the facts.

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MURRAY: I know that you and your family donate a lot of your time and money to charities. Has this incidence discouraged you and/or your family from helping those in need?

RAO: Quite the contrary. Our desire to help those in need has been further fortified by this incidence. We know in our hearts that while my assumption was misplaced about the abandonment of the bike, the act itself was altruistic with no personal gain and that we were truly helping a homeless person (who was well-known to many in the University community) in a time of need. It is rather unfortunate that sometimes for various personal or political reasons, one's altruistic actions are misconstrued by those around them but it is important to remember that one does not commit acts of goodwill to impress fellow colleagues but to help those in need.

MURRAY: I understand that your compensation became a big issue in this debate which prompted the local news media to request (under the Public Record request) salaries of all those in leadership positions in the University? Once that information was released, it became very clear that your salary was not inconsistent with what was paid to your colleagues. Did it bother you that people and media were raising questions about issues unrelated to this event?

RAO: At that time, I was an employee of a public institution and as such, I considered information about my compensation and my role in that Institution subject to Sunshine Law. When this event happened, it became a free-for-all for those who thrive on taking cheap shots at others. It was sad that some individuals of significant social repute and for whom I had great respect and admiration

brought my family, my religion, my faith, and my home into this discussion. Some who spoke on behalf of the University misrepresented the facts only to retrieve them at a later date. It is these events that bothered me more that a conversation about my compensation which was public knowledge and as you stated, not inconsistent with my colleagues at USF Health and other similarly-sized institutions in the U.S.

MURRAY: In preparation for this interview, I met with some highly respected members of the Indian and Pakistani community in the Greater Tampa Bay area and you should be very pleased to note that you continue to enjoy their utmost respect and trust. In fact, many stated that after this incidence, their respect for you and your family has increased many fold. Some suggested that you should have taken legal action against the University and/or those who were engaged in slander. I was also informed that in fact a Defense Fund was created by the local community to help you in this regards but you refused to proceed. What was the reasoning behind this decision?

RAO: It is indeed heartening for me to learn that the members of the local Indian and Pakistani community hold me in such high regards. I know that I have done nothing specifically to gain their praise, trust or respect but to serve most honorably as their colleague and friend. Take legal action against an entity which I hold so dearly close to my heart? That is just not possible. I spend all my waking hours serving USF and its faculty, staff, and students. I love that Institution and I will not do anything even in my wildest imagination to harm the University. It is my University and always will be. Many members of the community could not understand nor appreciate my level of allegiance and continued loyalty to this Institution despite of everything that had transpired.

"My allegiance and loyalty to USF and USF health remains unwavering. I will not do anything in my wildest imagination that would harm the reputation of that Institution".

Rao, A.S.

MURRAY: Thank you for your time and for your most candid responses to some of my very difficult questions. I assure you that I will not make any changes in your response and it will be reporter verbatim. I would like to come back and interview you about the research enhancements that you are making in the Institute and the partnerships that you are creating with regional medical centers and I hope that you will afford me this opportunity in the next few months.

RAO: You are most welcome and I look forward to visiting with you again and discussing some exciting initiatives that we have undertaken in the areas of research, clinical partnerships and education. Thank you.