

# Dean Henri Ford is Passionate about Leading the Miller School to its 'Fullest Potential'

As he begins his adventure as dean of the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, Henri R. Ford, M.D., says he is “extraordinarily excited and at the same time humbled by this great privilege.”



Henri R. Ford, M.D.

He is ready to break down silos, build bridges between research areas, and promote connectivity that will lead to the medical advances of tomorrow. “My vision is that we’re going to create an ecosystem here that’s going to allow the convergence of clinical and basic science, and promote excellence in education for medical students and graduate students, as well as residents and fellows,” said Ford, a pediatric surgeon who comes to Miami from Children’s Hospital Los Angeles and the University of Southern California’s Keck School of Medicine.

“The various disciplines will work together in a collegial, collaborative fashion to promote new discoveries that will be translated ultimately to clinical interventions for the patients of South Florida, the state of Florida, Latin America and the Caribbean, and globally,” he said.

“Today it’s all about team science. And we as an institution must capitalize on that by fostering this unprecedented era of cooperation. It’s about bringing together all the strengths of the University of Miami and working together to forge new discoveries. This approach will make the Miller School of Medicine the preferred destination for the best students, residents and fellows, and will allow us to reach our fullest potential as a university and also as a school of medicine.”

Before moving just days ago to what he calls his “dream job” at the Miller School, Ford was senior vice president and chief of surgery at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles, vice dean of medical education, and professor and vice chair for clinical affairs in the Department of Surgery at the Keck School of Medicine.

Born in Haiti and educated at Princeton University and Harvard Medical School, Ford says he is guided in all endeavors by five key principles “derived in part from my parents’ teaching and my upbringing, but also immortalized in the biography of Arnold Beckman, the great chemist of our time.”

“Rule Number One is there is no satisfactory substitute for excellence,” Ford said. “That’s what drives me. Our team is not here to be good or very good — it’s all about excellence. It starts with me, and we won’t settle for anything less.

“Rule Number Two is absolute integrity in everything, because if excellence is the currency that we deal with, then integrity has to be the scaffold on which it is built. Without integrity, no matter what you achieve, it’s going to come crashing down.”

Number Three is moderation in everything, including moderation itself. “And Number Four, especially important as we look to become even more preeminent as a medical school and health system, is hire the best people and stay out of their way,” Ford said. “Make sure we empower the individuals who comprise our team, giving them the tools necessary to become outstanding.

“I live vicariously through the success of members of my team,” he said. “I like to tell people I think I’m a gardener, though I know nothing about gardening, and it’s really about turning over soil, irrigating it, fertilizing it so the seeds can bear fruits.”

The fifth guiding principle, he said, is “never take yourself too seriously. I want to be a very approachable individual, I want to hear from people. We can crack a joke about my big head or my funny accent.”

Before his work in Los Angeles, Ford was professor and chief of the Division of Pediatric Surgery and surgeon-in-chief at the Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh and the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. Throughout his career, he has maintained his close ties with Haiti, traveling there after the 2010 earthquake to provide surgical care to children injured in the catastrophe. Since then, he has returned to Haiti regularly to provide medical care to its residents.

That same dedication fuels his commitment to be a “servant leader” of the Miller School.

“I am here to serve the needs of the medical school community,” Ford said. “If all the outstanding people who comprise this institution are empowered to do their work, and to do so energetically with the vigor and passion I believe they’re capable of, then we’ll transform this institution into one of *the* preeminent medical schools and health systems. I’m excited about that.

“The concept of breaking the silos is huge,” he said. “There are certain prominent universities that may be full of Nobel laureates or preeminent researchers who can afford to function in silos. The Miller School needs to evolve outside of this concept. But I believe if we combine the existing resources that we have by breaking down silos, we can surpass some of these perceived great institutions. That’s our vision.”

Ford is enthusiastic about the evolution of medical education and the Miller School’s work to find the best models for the curriculum of the future. Fundamental to any advance in education is exposing students to clinical medicine as early as possible.

“This will better prepare them for the practice of medicine, and it’s also going to shift the training from the classroom to more small-group learning,” he said. “It’s exciting to be a medical student today because there are so many tools available for them. It’s also true that the volume of information is much greater than it was when I was coming through, in the Jurassic age.

“It ensures they will be better equipped to handle challenging problems going forward,” he said. “And it speaks volumes for the future health of the American people.”

Working with the health system, Ford says the Miller School will prioritize the four research pillars that

were identified in the strategic plan for research: cancer, neuroscience, HIV/AIDS and emerging pathogens, and inflammation, metabolism, and immunotherapies. “My goal is to make sure we execute the plan and that the luminary programs that we feel are crucial to our success are fully supported and that they deliver on the promise that was articulated for them.”

“Ultimately the Miller School has to become the preferred destination for the best applicants to medical school,” Ford said. “And the university health system will become the preferred destination for people not just from Latin America, the West Indies and South Florida, but from the rest of the state and the country. That’s the promise.”