Student Safety, New Curriculum are the Focus at Medical Parents Association Orientation

While the Medical Parents Association (MPA) Orientation is traditionally an in-person event, incoming students of the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine Class of 2024 and their families received the informative welcome this year in a virtual setting.

The online orientation gave parents and family members a glimpse into what lies ahead for their students at the Miller School. “As a parent of an M.D./M.P.H. student, and 2013 and 2016 Miller School graduates, I share your excitement and sense of pride,” said Vicky Egusquiza, M.D. ’87, who along with Lourdes Sanjenis, M.D., M.B.A. ’96, is co-president of the MPA.

“As the proud parent of a 2017 Miller School graduate,” said Dr. Sanjenis, “I can tell you that your student is going to have an outstanding learning experience.”
Dean Henri R. Ford

Henri R. Ford, M.D., M.H.A., dean and chief academic officer of the Miller School, welcomed parents with words of gratitude and a nod to the School’s far-reaching vision. “I want to thank you for trusting us to educate and prepare your children to become physician leaders who will be empowered to save lives and inspired to serve our global community.”

The Miller School received 8,773 applications, and ultimately matriculated 204 students in the Class of 2024, including 151 in the M.D. program and 53 in the M.D./M.P.H. program.

More than 65 percent of the class comes from outside the state of Florida, 61 percent are women, 58 percent are minorities, and 40 percent are underrepresented in medicine, almost a 10 percent increase from the Class of 2023. The average MCAT percentile rank was 87 percent for matriculating students in the M.D. program and 86 percent in the M.D./M.P.H. program.

The MPA orientation was a real-time opportunity for parents to ask questions and hear from the medical school administration and upper-class student leaders about safety measures, the new
medical education curriculum, student experience, and resources. Key highlights focused on a comprehensive overview of safety protocols in the face of COVID-19 and the launch of NextGenMD, the new Miller School of Medicine curriculum.

“The Class of 2024 will be the first entering class to experience NextGenMD,” said Dean Ford, “This is a transformation of the Miller School curriculum that will allow students to succeed in the rapidly changing, technology-driven landscape of today’s health care ecosystem.”

“Dean Ford has made a commitment for change, a commitment to move us to a high-functioning learning organization and his vision has energized the faculty here,” said Latha Chandran, M.D., M.P.H., the newly appointed executive dean of the Miller School and founding chair of the Department of Medical Education. “NextGenMD will produce self-directed transformative leaders in health care.”

Dr. Chandran, who was the vice dean for academic and faculty
affairs and the Donoho Distinguished Teaching Professor at Stony Brook University before she joined the Miller School in June, shared her confidence in elevating the School’s academic reputation to national prominence. “I am impressed by the quality and caliber of our medical students,” said Dr. Chandran, “I am also very encouraged by the quality of the faculty, the diverse expertise, passions and talents aligned with a strong sense of commitment to the U.”

Amar R. Deshpande, M.D. ’02, assistant dean for medical education, who helped lead the NextGenMD curriculum development, described an inquiry-based, data driven process to build a curriculum.

“We approached it much like we do many clinical problems, which is really trying to understand what base of evidence currently exists that best informs our curriculum,” said Dr. Deshpande. The medical education team surveyed research on young adult learning and assessed innovative curricula from
more than 40 schools across the world, while establishing best practices for the unique academic experience of a Miami-based university.

NextGenMD integrates practical application and self-directed learning in three interconnected disciplines – foundational science, clinical care, and health systems science, while emphasizing key attributes of professionalism and interpersonal skills. “These days it’s not about memorizing a bunch of minutiae, it’s about applying that medical knowledge to be able to inform patient care,” said Dr. Deshpande. “We really want to create transformational leaders who will shape the future of medicine.”

Changes in the curriculum designed to foster real-world application include an integrated clerkship model earlier on where students incorporate learning, not only across basic science and clinical science, but also across specialties. “As an example, this is where we would combine the perspectives of an emergency medicine physician, an anesthesiologist, and a surgeon in one integrated clerkship to see how a surgical patient is treated,” explained Dr. Deshpande.

The MPA orientation also addressed concerns around student safety and procedures to cope with the ongoing pandemic. Gauri Agarwal, M.D. ’00, associate dean for clinical curriculum, went over safety protocols designed to protect students, faculty, and staff, including screening, the enforcement of social distancing, and the use of masks. “We've had a lot of experience with this,” said Dr. Agarwal. “Our third- and fourth-year medical students started in June. We've been developing and refining our protocol and it's going very
well.”

Dr. Agarwal showed on-site photos of signage, strategically located hand sanitizers, plastic barricades between student workstations, and prepped auditorium spaces, among other measures, to illustrate infrastructural safety enhancements. She also defined the student learning experience as “hybrid and protected.” Students experience large group settings virtually and small group sessions in person, but with all protective systems in place.

Most importantly, incoming students were encouraged to continue practicing safety protocols in the community. “I want to remind all parents that you are an important ally in this effort,” said Dr. Agarwal. “You can remind your children that they must protect themselves at all times in the community in order to protect everybody within the health system.”

The MPA orientation also served as an opportunity for parents to learn about student services. Roderick K. King, M.D., M.P.H., senior associate dean for diversity, inclusion, and community engagement, introduced his office’s work to create the leaders of tomorrow. “Our purpose is to create a learning and working environment that essentially supports everyone,” said Dr. King. “We are here for students, faculty, and staff to help them reach their fullest potential, regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status.”

The families also heard from Chris Alabiad, M.D. ’02, assistant dean for student affairs. “The Office of Student Affairs handles everything from understanding attendance policies, credits, grades, graduation requirements, as well as
enforcing policies,” said Dr. Alabiad, who is also an associate professor of clinical ophthalmology.

Dr. Hilit F. Mechaber

Staying on top of course work and balancing life and school requirements can be overwhelming for some students. Hilit F. Mechaber, M.D. ’95, associate dean for student services, urged students to reach out for help when dealing with the inevitable challenges that will arise during their training. “Medical students don’t often ask for help, it’s not something they are used to doing,” said Dr. Mechaber. “We make sure they have what they need to succeed. We focus on academic counseling and support as well as career counseling, well-being, and student professional development starting from the very first few weeks of medical school.”

The MPA orientation closed with a Q&A session with upper-class student leaders from key volunteer student groups, including the Mitchell Wolfson Sr. Department of Community Service (Wolfson DOCS) program.

Miller School programs like Wolfson DOCS, which provides vital
health care screenings for thousands of medically underserved South Florida residents each year, are supported by volunteers with the MPA, who provide meals and drinks for the students. Dr. Egusquiza encouraged parents to join MPA and help their students achieve their goals. “In the past, members have supported many initiatives, such as Wolfson DOCS health fairs and student awards,” she said. “We will continue to use these funds to improve the Miller School experience for students and position them for success.”