University of Miami Family of Physicians Establishes Endowed Chair to Further Health Equity Initiative

Multiple generations of the Chen family have graduated from the University of Miami and the Leonard M. Miller School of Medicine. And like the Miller School, the Chens have a longstanding passion for reducing health disparities and improving the lives of residents in the most medically underserved communities.

The Chen Family Foundation is looking to expand that shared mission even further by donating $3 million to establish the Chen Family Endowed Chair to Advance Primary Care and Health Equity Research.

(From left) Gordon Chen, M.D. ’05, chief medical officer, ChenMed; Jessica Lane
Chen, M.D. ’06, chief clinical officer; Stephanie Chen, chief legal and culture officer; Chris Chen, M.D. ’00, CEO; Mary Chen, co-founder and chief market development officer; and Jen-ling Chen, Ph.D., M.D. ’81, founder

“The foresight, leadership, and dedication of Dr. Chris Chen and his family will propel the University forward in our pursuit of health equity,” said University of Miami President Julio Frenk. “We are incredibly appreciative of their generosity and partnership.”

The Chen Family Endowed Chair to Advance Primary Care and Health Equity Research will enable the Miller School’s Department of Medicine to recruit a leader with extensive experience in primary and population health care, allowing the University to become the leader in primary care and medicine among academic institutions. Once aboard, that expert will be tasked with researching and improving the way primary care is delivered, and health equity is advanced, throughout South Florida.

"We are lucky to have Dr. Chris Chen’s expertise as a partner and are excited about the establishment of this new chair, which will enhance the way we look at primary care and how we can make it accessible to all members of our community, developing new models of compassionate delivery," said Roy E. Weiss, M.D., Ph.D., chair of the Department of Medicine, the Rabbi Morris I. Esformes Endowed Chair in Medicine and Endocrinology, the Kathleen and Stanley Glaser Distinguished Chair, and chief medical officer for ambulatory services for UHealth. “We are proud to be partnering on such an important
health initiative that will ultimately benefit residents throughout our community and beyond.”

In a way, the Miller School is like an extension of the Chen family. In addition to his father, Jen-ling Chen, Ph.D., M.D. ’81, and younger brother, Gordon Chen M.D. ’05, Chris Chen, M.D. ’00, has other relatives who are Miller School alumni: uncle Peter Chang, M.D. ’79; uncle Kenneth Lo, M.D. ’82; sister-in-law (Gordon’s wife) Jessica Lane Chen, M.D. ’06; and Jason Lane, M.D. ’01, his former roommate and Dr. Gordon Chen’s brother-in-law.

The Chen family's mission to reduce health disparities is based on the imperatives of their Christian faith to serve and help others. That mission was intensified in 2003 after their struggle with the health care system. Dr. Jen-ling Chen was diagnosed with cancer and given only two months to live. At a cancer center in another state, the family said, they experienced what it was like to be on the receiving end of fragmented, unsympathetic health care, where the multiple specialists involved did not collaborate, appointments had to be booked weeks in advance, and compassion seemed lacking.

Chen’s father recovered and soon delved into a new mission: developing a method of delivering medical services that provided a superior level of care and positively impacted patients' lives, particularly in underserved communities.

"When we began building out ChenMed, we were very much aware of what the delivery system felt like from the other side of the glass," said Dr. Chris Chen, CEO of Chen Med. "That drives many of our decisions: What would we want if we were in the patient's shoes? Our goal was to deliver superior patient outcomes and a positive patient experience to a typically
underserved population during the most vulnerable time of their lives."

The result is ChenMed, a concierge-style health care practice that strives to be America’s leading primary care provider, transforming the care of the neediest populations. It operates more than 100 primary care medical practices in 15 states, and with its emphasis on preventive care, the organization’s hospital admission rate is 30 to 50% lower than the national average.

“This is why we are investing in the University of Miami,” Dr. Chen said. “The unique UHealth, Miller School, and Jackson partnership that cares for one of the most racially and socioeconomically diverse populations in the U.S. is the perfect place to build the beachhead for this movement in academia."

The Chen endowment aligns with the Miller School's commitment to health equity and medical education. As home to one of the most diverse populations in the nation, the school is committed to treating patients respectfully across distinct cultures and ethnicities and furthering its mission to improve health equity.

Innovative community-based programs, many run by medical student volunteers, provide thousands of South Florida residents with access to comprehensive care and services. The Miller School’s innovative NextGenMD curriculum trains today’s physicians to go beyond traditional medical care and become specialists in preventive care, precision medicine, and personalized health care that focuses on understanding of the social determinants of health.
“We have prioritized creating an optimal learning environment for students of all backgrounds because we believe diversity in the classroom produces doctors who are better equipped to serve the patients who need them,” said Henri R. Ford, M.D., M.H.A., dean and chief academic officer of the Miller School. "Health equity is one of the pillars of education that we teach at the Miller School, and establishing this chair will help further that goal."

Dr. Chen credits that community focus with preparing him for his career. As a medical student, he and his classmates gained valuable training serving a much more heterogeneous demographic than they would encounter at other schools.

"Doctors who come out of programs with a strong urban presence, such as UM, do a great job of making people better," Dr. Chen said. "They have discovered that 85% of health care is about what lies outside the clinic – a person's genetic code, where they live, and their lifestyles and behaviors. We saw that daily at UM when dealing with patient challenges that have nothing to do with pills, procedures, specialists, and tests."

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