

Meet School of Dentistry Dean John Sauk

October 9th, 2007

Accreditation, renovation, the research agenda — these are among the top priorities facing the School of Dentistry's newly appointed dean, John Sauk. Sauk came to the University of Louisville Sept. 4 from University of Maryland Dental School, located on the University of Maryland Baltimore campus.

Meet John J. Sauk

Hometown: Detroit, Michigan

Educational background: I went to the University of Detroit for both my bachelor's and dental degrees. At the University of Minnesota I earned a master's degree in oral pathology.

Subsequently, I was in the U.S. Navy and was stationed at the Naval Dental Research Institute in Great Lakes, Ill. Afterward, I returned to the University of Minnesota in the Department of Pathology and Genetics where I became a professor.



John Sauk

I left to go to Maryland where I was associate dean for research administration and training, professor and chair of diagnostic sciences and pathology and a member of Greenebaum Cancer Center.

Describe your career path: I am a researcher, interested in the molecular mechanisms for targeting cancer cells. I am trained as a pathologist; in pathology, cancer gets a lot of attention. It has high impact and had a high incidence in Maryland. There's also a high incidence of cancer in Kentucky, to be sure. My interest in cancer evolved naturally.

What do you think of Louisville so far? To some degree, moving to Louisville feels like getting back to the Midwest, with maybe a big toe in the South. After living on the East Coast, it's nice to meet people who say "please" and "thank you." The staff I've inherited are superb — very responsive and dedicated.

Why UofL? Coming to UofL was unplanned, to be sure. I was asked to come down. Initially I wasn't interested, but a friend said I should take a look so I agreed to interview.

The high point was meeting Dr. Larry Cook. I hesitated about leaving Baltimore, but I was looking for challenges from my work. I brought my wife and she was very positive ... she really enjoys everything about Louisville.

What is your vision for the School of Dentistry? The dental school faces a number of challenges. It is imperative to have strong programs in discovery and research and ours must continue to grow. I see that occurring in a very interdisciplinary way. There should be no silos isolating the different schools.

Right now I'm interested in incorporating nanotechnology into our research portfolio. In essence this field focuses on miniaturization, e.g. utilizing small gold particles and attaching drugs or imaging agents for treatment or diagnosis. Other approaches may include the development of biomotors at the nanoscale that can enhance physiological function. Nanotechnology started in engineering; now biologists are working to catch up.

What are your next steps? As an academic health care facility, we need to become a tertiary care facility, one that derives its referrals from other practitioners. That has not happened in dentistry. We need to become the referral base for other dentists instead of trying to compete with them.

The new faculty practice building will be an important component for this process. Currently, we don't have a good clinical facility to handle such patient referrals efficiently. The current building is 34 years old and has never really been renovated. We must have a better physical plant to recruit quality students, faculty and researchers.

All the equipment and the clinical areas must be redone. That's an expensive process because the dental school has more electrical and plumbing needs than other health science facilities. We did this in Maryland and ours was the most expensive building ever put up by the state.

Our timeline depends on the state legislature — that's the limiting factor. I have been told that we're second on the university's renewal list; whether the legislature allows us to go forward is the question. It will be a real disappointment if that doesn't happen.

What special strengths have you found at UofL? The School of Dentistry has lots of experience in research and has received continuous funding for more than 30 years. We have the research know-how.

The school's background in private practice gives us the depth of experience to know how an organization should be run.

We have a solid group of people here. In terms of recruiting, the quality of life, the crime rate, housing costs, they all play in our favor. Kentucky is a very nice setting.

All in all, we're faced with a number of challenges here at UofL — what school isn't — but the school has a lot of promise for an exciting future.

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