

# Mia Savoia: Dual Roles of Dean and Diseases Doctor

By John B.B. Freeman

Despite advances in global healthcare, the threat of highly infectious diseases spreading out of control, here and abroad, is a constant concern for Mia Savoia.

As an infectious diseases physician at UCSD Medical Center, she's well aware that the next great pandemic could be lurking around the corner.

Take, for example, the Chikungunya virus (CHIKV) spread by mosquito bites. Savoia points out that the highly infectious disease, similar to Dengue fever, was recently found for the first time in the Americas, on islands in the Caribbean. Previously, it had only been in countries in Africa, Asia, and Europe.

"That's a definite worry, just like what happened with SARS and MERS and the swine flu," she said. "It's all out there. We just have to be careful and vigilant."

As if that's not enough for her to worry about, Savoia has another title: dean of medical education at the UC San Diego School of Medicine, with oversight of admissions. In that role, she's looking to admit medical students with something more than medical knowledge.

"You must have the knowledge," said Savoia, "but today, becoming a doctor is also about having good



Photographs by Erik Jepsen

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—Mia Savoia

judgment, critical thinking skills, and the ability to make the best decisions under extreme pressure.”

For good measure, add equal parts “stability, maturity, altruism, curiosity, some level of emotional intelligence and ability to communicate, dedication ... all those things,” she said. “It’s much easier when you start with that as a template.”

In addition to her clinical and admissions duties, Savoia is committed to continuing education. She was a critical member of the advisory team that worked with UC San Diego Extension to create a post-bac pre-med program that gives promising students a second chance to be admitted to medical school.

Savoia is integrally involved in three master’s degree programs that are partnerships between Extension and the School of Medicine. Plus, she is on the admissions committee of the master’s program in leadership of healthcare organizations.

After earning her medical degree from Harvard Medical School and an undergraduate degree at Wellesley College, Savoia first came to UCSD School of Medicine as an intern in 1976.

Within two years, she was appointed chief medical resident in her specialty. After a series of upward executive moves spanning some 35 years, coinciding with her physician role, she was named dean of medical education in 2010.

“I really like the different nature of my jobs,” she said. “No matter what, I always try to advance the mission of medicine as best I know how. I know it sounds pretty Pollyannaish, but that’s how I feel.”

Growing up, Savoia and her family lived on the far end of Long Island, in Shoreham, NY. Both her parents were doctors in nearby Bayville, a small resort town. Her father served the town’s fire fighters and police officers; her mother was the physician for the public and Catholic schools.

“After school, they’d pile us kids—me and my sister and brother—in the back of the car and they’d make house calls, one after the other,” she said. “We’d do our homework in the backseat.”

That’s when her medical aspirations began to take shape, especially since she also spent considerable time tending to her older brother, who is developmentally disabled and mentally ill.

“Honestly, I don’t think I ever thought about doing anything else except going into medicine,” said Savoia. “It just seemed that’s what I was going to do. Maybe that’s

a failing, I don’t know. But I’ve been pretty happy with the way my life has turned out.”

These days, the practice of medicine brings more than its share of workaday frustrations.

“It’s especially hard when you have ten people waiting to see you, you’re way behind schedule, you’re hungry, you’ve just argued with an insurance company, and you can’t figure out how to do something in the electronic medical record,” said Savoia. “But you have to try to live through those moments, and keep your eye on the goal, which is caring for patients.”

By the time her UC San Diego School of Medicine students and residents are ready to graduate or complete their training, they often feel overextended.

“At some point, they need to realize that there are limits,” she said. “Yes, we need to be dedicated and work long hours, but if we don’t know our own limits, we will not be good doctors.

“Aristotle believed you could have too much of a virtue as well as too little. So for me, it’s all about seeking that life’s balance.” ■



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