

Leader Profile



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Catarina Kiefe, Ph.D., M.D.

Department Chair

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— Dr. Catarina Kiefe

Road from research to clinical practice leads to improved health care

Portuguese native and U.S. citizen Catarina Kiefe, Ph.D., M.D., has spent her career focusing on the most direct route to the next destination. She began as a mathematician, earning her doctoral degree at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Then, she earned her medical degree at the University of California, San Francisco. She specialized in internal medicine, completing her residency at the University of Minnesota Hospitals and Clinics. Now, as the inaugural chair of the Department of Quantitative Health Sciences at the University of Massachusetts Medical School (UMMS), she combines the rigor of mathematics with the needs of clinical medicine.

While criss-crossing the country, Dr. Kiefe has come full circle with a twist. She draws upon the intellectual curiosity and drive for discovery that marked her early career as an abstract researcher, using it to help her lead an applied research function with the objective of improving healthcare outcomes for individuals and populations.

UMMS’s goal in establishing its new department was, and remains, ambitious. The medical school’s vision is for the Department of Quantitative Health Sciences to bridge the school’s strengths in basic research and clinical services and play a pivotal role in helping UMMS to become one of the top 25 research medical schools in the U.S. As department chair, Dr. Kiefe is largely responsible for making that vision a reality.

Dr. Kiefe describes her journey to academic department chair as “bizarre,” but that unusual route distilled a disparity of experience to create exactly the leader that UMMS needed for its new department. As a mathematician, she is straightforward and concise. As a researcher, she mines data for insight into elements of cause and effect. As a clinician, she “weaves service — a link to practice — into discovery.” And as a leader she promotes cohesion among her team and colleagues around a collective vision.

Challenges do not deter Dr. Kiefe’s drive for results. “This worldwide economic crisis affects everyone,” she says. “We’ve had budgetary issues, but it’s been better for us than others in our area perhaps, because this institution has extraordinary leadership. It’s also a time of turmoil in health care. The landscape is shifting very rapidly. We are using science to accelerate change in health care for the public good.”

Dr. Kiefe is meeting her challenges head-on with planning and purpose. The department she leads represents a new wave in health care, and her vision is to improve health through methodological innovation. The goals she has set to realize that vision are a work in progress.

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“Everyone agrees that in order to improve, we need to measure the quality of health care,” she says, “but the devil is in the details. We need to get health systems to change the way they do things, so we can measure improvement. This involves quantitative skills in terms of defining measures, how you aggregate research results and how you analyze data to determine cause and effect.”

A strong leadership team is fundamental to achieving the kinds of outcomes Dr. Kiefe envisions. She built her team in characteristically direct fashion: She analyzed the work to be done, decided on the department’s divisional structure and set her sights on field leaders for the open roles. Then, she went after them — and was successful in putting together the top team she’d targeted.

She’s not finished building, however. Dr. Kiefe counts on depth to maintain her organization’s strength. “We continue to recruit,” she said. “We are putting into place mid-level and junior faculty to complement our strong senior leaders.”

Dr. Kiefe’s record of success in academia is largely the result of her talent for collaboration. “In the long term, our work will stand or fall depending on how well we work with other departments,” she says. “I make sure everyone agrees on expectations up front. I anticipate turf issues and try to promote common interests. And people learn that I can be relied upon to do what I promise.”

After a full year on the job and assembling an intact leadership team, Dr. Kiefe is working with her team to redefine her initial mission and vision. In bi-weekly meetings and a strategic planning retreat, they have developed a mission, vision and goals, a short-term plan, a five-year plan and a parking lot of ideas for the long term.

The roadmap is direct; the milestones are clear. And the work is exciting both for the potential it holds to benefit the health of individuals and populations and because Dr. Kiefe loves it — and so does her team.

“I can’t overemphasize that people excel only in what they are passionate about,” she says. “You must identify your passion and make that your work. Also, seek out mentors. I was lucky: People saw things in me that I didn’t see in myself. I found my passion; now, I help others find theirs.”

Witt/Kieffer is proud to have consulted with the University of Massachusetts Medical School on this important executive search assignment.

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