

Leader Profile



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Selwyn M. Vickers, M.D.

Jay Phillips Professor
and Chairman

Department of Surgery
University of Minnesota

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Influencing Others Through Education and Outreach

From an early age, Selwyn Vickers, M.D. understood the importance of education as both a path to achieving personal success and an opportunity for nurturing others. “Leaders need a certain level of achievement in their own careers that allows them to focus on the careers of others,” says Dr. Vickers, currently the Jay Phillips Professor and Chairman of the Department of Surgery in the Medical School at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.

Throughout his career, Dr. Vickers’ commitment to helping others develop professionally has extended from training individual physicians to outreach within minority communities. A past president of the Society of Black Academic Surgeons, he served as co-director of the Minority Health & Research Center at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) and has been active in efforts to encourage minority students to pursue careers in the health sciences professions.

“There is a growing cultural disparity for many African American kids — a loss of ability to understand how to make the right decisions for success,” he explains. “They need to see a pathway to hope and see the opportunity ahead of them.”

Dr. Vickers grew up in Huntsville, AL, where his father was a college professor and his mother taught high school. At age 15 he decided he wanted to be a doctor. Dr. Vickers earned his B.A. in Natural Sciences at Johns Hopkins University and went on to attend medical school and complete his residency and postdoctoral fellowship there.

While training under pioneering pancreatic surgeon John Cameron, M.D., Dr. Vickers became fascinated by the challenge of treating pancreatic cancer. “Ninety-five percent of patients die of this disease,” he explains, noting that the five-year survival rate for patients has remained virtually unchanged over the past 50 years. “When taking care of patients with pancreatic cancer, you have to have a linear relationship between research and treatment.”

Today, Dr. Vickers is a nationally respected leader in pancreatic cancer research, focusing on gene therapy for treating pancreatobiliary tumors, the role of growth factors and receptors, and assessment of clinical outcomes of surgical treatment. He is the co-principal investigator on a \$4.5 million Pancreatic Cancer Specialized Program of Research Excellence (SPORE) grant from the National Cancer Institute, one of only three awarded nationwide.

Dr. Vickers also served as principle investigator on a \$5 million NIH grant to study health disparities. The project provides diabetes and colon cancer screening and education in minority communities, and works with healthcare providers to improve the effectiveness of treatment. He hopes the results of this research will be used to make a positive impact on the substantial disparities in cancer outcomes and access to health

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care, as well as improve care in the Native American community and the growing immigrant population in Minnesota.

“The University of Alabama is a unique institution,” he says. “It’s one of the top 20 NIH-funded universities, a top five clinical university, an outstanding institution — and a well-kept secret.” During Dr. Vickers’ 12-year tenure at UAB, he held a number of leadership roles, including chief of gastrointestinal surgery and co-director of the Pancreaticobiliary Center.

“Department chairs in surgery basically run a small company, with budgets of more than \$50 million, supervising 50-100 surgeons and 300-400 staff members,” he notes. “Most revenue in academic health centers comes from the department of surgery. So you need to have strong management skills, communicate well, be decisive and not easily offended.”

Accepting the position as head of the Department of Surgery at the University of Minnesota Medical School in 2006 fulfilled a lifelong dream for Dr. Vickers. One of the oldest departments of surgery in the country, the U of M department has had only three previous chairs in its 80 years. “It has a tremendous history of academic excellence and clinical innovation,” he says. Dr. Vickers looks forward to building on this outstanding foundation by strengthening collaborations across medical and research specialties and helping to establish the U of M as a center for pancreatic cancer treatment and research.

Dr. Vickers — who has been listed among America’s Top Doctors as well as named one of the Best Doctors in America — continues to devote substantial time to treating patients. “It’s important to take a balanced approach to being clinically relevant,” he says. “I’m credible only if I grow my own career as well as help others to grow theirs.”

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