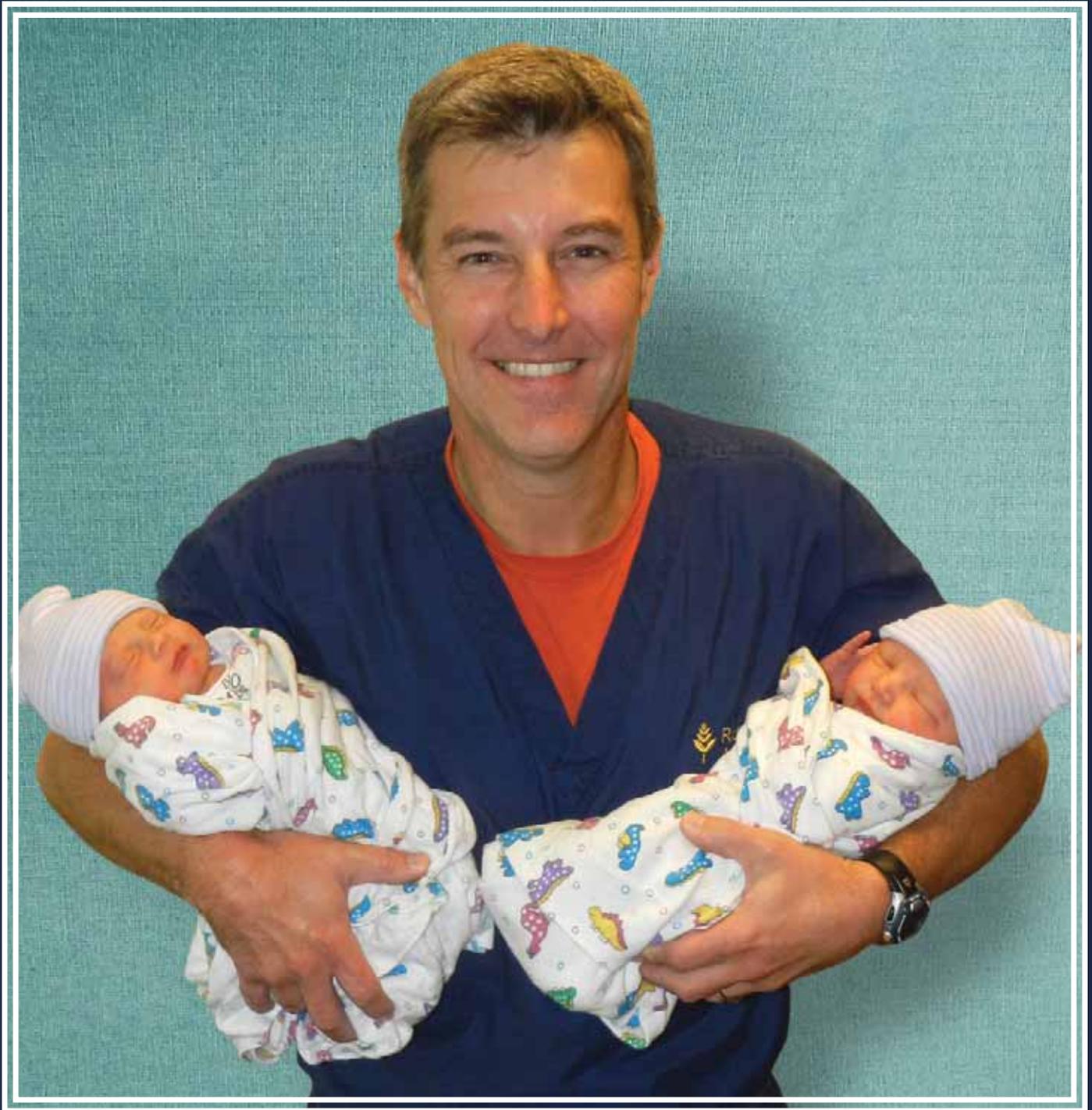


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Robert K. Cowan, MD
2016 TCMS President

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Leanne DuPay

“I want to grow and retain membership and emphasize the importance of being involved.”

Dr. Robert Cowan’s childhood is one hound dog short of a country song. Cowan comes from Hillsboro—a small farming town 30 miles north of Waco. Wearing boots, working his family’s 100-year-old cattle ranch and playing football under Friday night lights made for an all-American, down-home upbringing. “I think growing up in a small town helped me in medicine more than I realize,” he says. “Small towns value relationships fiercely—and that’s what medicine, particularly OB/GYN, is all about.” Cowan’s easy manner and approachability is also something he attributes to his past. “Small towns have a slower pace of life, and I think that translates into my having a more laid-back demeanor, which my patients really connect to.”

As salutatorian of his high school class, Cowan had college choices. His hometown buddies selected A&M to study agriculture, but he went the urban route and attended UT. “I enjoyed science but never even thought about becoming a physician until I was a junior.” He left college with a BS in biology and from there attended UTMB Galveston to get his MD. His residency in obstetrics and gynecology was completed at John Peter Smith

Hospital in Fort Worth in 1995, where he was chief resident.

Opening his practice in Austin was an easy decision. “Everything is here! We have access to the Capitol for legislative meetings, the TMA headquarters are here—not to mention the fact that Austin is home to St. David’s Women’s Center of Texas, which is crucial to my practice,” he explains. “Also, let’s not overlook Austin’s great food, great people and amazing outdoor activities.”

One thing Cowan knew positively was that his chosen specialty had to include surgery and interaction with patients. “The best part of my job is establishing long-term relationships with my patients and their families. OB/GYN is ideal because I get to deliver babies,” he says. “I love seeing young families so excited. New dads are especially fun to watch.” A great example of his rapport with his patients can be seen on the cover of this magazine. “The two babies that I am holding on the cover are babies I delivered,” he smiles. “I enjoyed getting to know the families throughout the nine months of pregnancy.”

On the subject of families, Dr. Cowan and his wife Julie have been married for 25 years and enjoy travel and weekends

at the family ranch. They have three kids—oldest son Rob and twins Will and Katie. Rob is an accountant in Houston and the twins are seniors in college (UT and A&M). Julie is very active in the community. She is a past president of the Travis County Medical Alliance and was recently elected to a 4-year term on the Austin Independent School District Board of Trustees.

Personable and funny by nature, Cowan is a different man when talking about young physicians today. He loves teaching residents and mentoring young physicians. “Today’s young physicians are incredibly well educated, but sometimes I worry about their lack of experience in the trenches. Some of the best lessons a doctor can learn occur in the hospital at 2 am.” Cowan understands it’s a new world and technology has allowed for physicians to have more control of their personal time. “But when I see them glancing at their watches, seemingly more concerned about clocking out than patient care, I wonder about the changing mentality,” he explains.

He is also very aware of the fading legacy of older physicians. “I used to go to the doctors’ dining room, search out the older physicians and sit with them,”



Dr. Cowan in the OR.

he remembers. “They taught me so much, and it’s good advice even now.” Mentors are valuable in any career, and Cowan recommends all young physicians have someone to set an example and advise them. “Looking back on my career, I have had several good role models that helped form me as a doctor. These physicians don’t necessarily need to be in your group or specialty but should embody those ideals that make our profession unique.”

More and more physicians are opting for employment rather than starting a private practice. “I tell young docs that it takes five years to build a private practice. For many of the newer generation it just feels like too long,” Cowan explains. He finds great satisfaction in the successful business owner he has become. “You really have to put yourself out there. It means

joining the Travis County Medical Society (TCMS), accepting speaking engagements and attending networking events,” he advises. “Word of mouth is what built my practice, not physician referrals. Be visible and generous with your time.”

Cowan does practice what he preaches. “Dr. Cowan has served the medical community well as a leader,” says Thomas Vaughn, MD. “He’s part of committees and advisory boards—most of all though, he is admired and respected by his patients and peers.” Certified by the American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Cowan is also a Fellow of the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology. In addition, he is an assistant professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology for the UT Southwestern Medical School and the UT Medical Branch in Galveston.

This year, Dr. Cowan will serve as

the president of TCMS, having been nominated and elected by his peers. “TCMS is a voice for physicians,” he says. “It allows us to feel engaged in the politics that affect us.” The best example of this voice, in his opinion, was the 2003 tort reform legislation which impacted medical liability by putting a cap on non-economic damages that could be awarded in personal injury lawsuits. Before tort reform, he says, shaking his head, “Medical liability was so bad, it would deter people from becoming physicians. Some doctors were wiped out financially, they’d just quit.”

During college, he worked at the Capitol. Not only did he meet his wife, who also worked there, but his interest in politics was sparked. “TCMS and TMA are very engaged with our state government and offer a number of

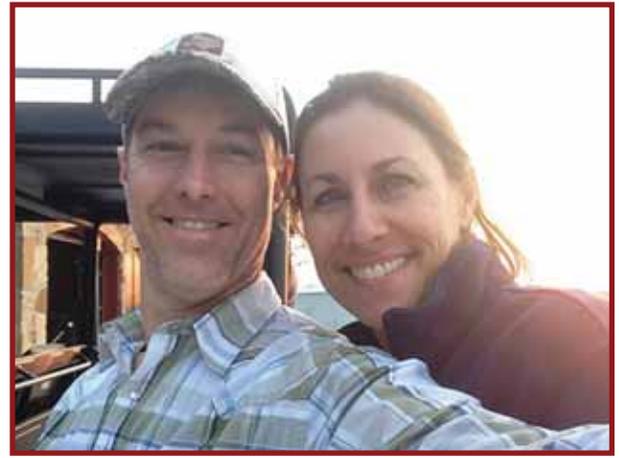
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opportunities to get involved—such as the TCMS Medical Legislation Committee. First Tuesdays at the Capitol is a wonderful place to start. It is so impressive to see the Capitol filled with white coats.” He emphasizes, “Physicians have a real opportunity to engage with our elected representatives and to voice our concerns.”

Cowan’s top priority for his term? “I want to grow and retain membership—emphasize the importance of being involved,” he says. “I want young physicians to take part in committees and task forces early in their careers so they feel connected to organized medicine.” Thanks to thoughtful scheduling by the TCMS staff, events and meetings are not difficult to attend around a medical career. “When I began to get involved with TCMS, I started by serving on some of the committees,” he explains. “The meeting schedules were manageable and I got to know the leaders of the Medical Society.” It was through these committees that Cowan began

to recognize the challenges facing physicians here in Austin. “I would like to expand opportunities for all physicians to participate and I do have some ideas to create a couple of new committees in areas that concern us.”

Next on his to-do list concerns the new Dell Medical School. Relations between physicians already established in a community can be strained when a new medical school comes to town. But Cowan wants to smooth the connection between the private physicians in Austin with the school’s incoming faculty. “We need to make sure that medical school administration, faculty and private practice doctors have a healthy relationship,” he explains. “Remember, we represent all member physicians. I would like to create a forum to bring both private and teaching physicians together to foster that relationship. This would probably best be



done by creating a liaison committee with a good mix of academic and community based physicians.”

All this in a year? Cowan doesn’t seem worried. He never does. His determination, characteristically easy manner and genial personality has served him well and should serve him well as the 2016 president of the Travis County Medical Society.



*Top:
Dr. Cowan and Julie at their ranch.
Middle:
After a long day, family time is still a priority.
Bottom:
Rob and Julie with their children Will, Katie and Rob.*



THE LEGACY OF MEDICINE



Physicians are consistently rated as the most honest and noble practitioners of a profession.

As the gavel is passed from Dr. Pradeep Kumar to me, I can't help but think of all the fine TCMS presidents that have come before. Twenty years ago, I was a new physician in Austin and just starting my career. I opened a small private office at St. David's Medical Center and started welcoming new patients. I didn't know many doctors and took it upon myself to meet as many as I could. From them, I thought I would get a lot of great referrals. It didn't take long for me to realize that in my specialty (OB/GYN), most of my referrals would come from the patients themselves.

It was a difficult time and the financial stress didn't help. Nevertheless, I persisted and built a nice practice. Running a solo office was at times lonely, but I met a lot of great docs that helped guide me on my journey. Now I am a partner in a much larger practice and much less stressed than I was back then.

I tell you this because I have come to the realization that no doctor is an island. We all depend on each other in some way, whether it is calling on colleagues to

help us out of a tight spot, bouncing an idea off a partner or asking for a consult from a physician in another specialty. We are all in this together and we depend on one another.

This is especially true for organized medicine. When we all come together with our collective voice it is compelling. Walking the State Capitol corridors with our white coats on First Tuesdays is quite a sight to see! Coming together for medicine-related social events or attending TCMS committee meetings allows one to meet other physicians and share thoughts and ideas about our beloved profession.

Which brings me to the "legacy of medicine": Physicians are consistently rated as the most honest and noble practitioners of a profession. This has been true throughout the decades. The standards we set are high and of course it is up to us to uphold them. We can all think of physicians we have known who have helped shape our thoughts, taught each us to do something better or just given us a little nugget of advice when we really needed it.

These are the physicians that mean the most to us. They are also the ones who helped make medicine such a respected and time-honored profession. We need to remember those who came before us. Before CT scanners. Before laparoscopes. Before computers and all the technology that makes it so much easier now to be a physician.

I have had the good fortune of crossing paths with several mentors who had a profound influence on me. In my residency, Dr. Robert Kinch taught me to lay hands on a patient and sit at their bedside to talk to them. Dr. Marion Stahl taught me how to put the patient first and to own your complications. Dr. Earl Grant taught me the value of organized medicine. Dr. Harold Brumley, the OB who delivered me, taught me how to

have fun in the office and enjoy the practice of medicine. Dr. Brumley actually passed his practice on to me. How's that for succession!

We all have stories. We all have important people that have influenced us. I am the only doctor in my family and when I started I had no idea what a dramatic impact other physicians would have on me. I want this legacy to continue. I'm not sure why I have such strong feelings about it, but I do realize that each of us is part of a larger picture—and it is our responsibility to carry it forward.

This realization hit home recently when I was asked by a younger colleague to advise him on a particular, complicated patient. I had previously thought of myself as the younger doc who solicited advice from the more practiced ones. Now I was the one who had the advice to give, the years of practice and experience to draw upon. I was able to pass on a little bit of the "legacy of medicine."

So now that I am uniquely qualified to dispense advice, here goes: Young physicians, find someone in the medical community who you respect and follow them everywhere! The wisdom they will impart to you is invaluable. You may not need it at the time but I promise it will come back to you at a moment when you need it most. Also, get to know your colleagues. You will rely on them in difficult times, and those relationships will matter. Sit down in the doctors' dining room and join a conversation. Meet someone new. Finally, enjoy your patients. You touch the lives of many people daily—often in a profound way. Laugh with them, touch them and sit down at their bedside.

Remember, **you** are the "legacy of medicine."


Robert K. Cowan, MD
2015 TCMS President