

# + BEYOND THE MASK: Interview with Dr. Patricia Houston

Interviewed by Dr. Jane Cooke-Lauder, BA, MBA, DM, CMC, the BTM Strategic Consultant, and Emily Hill, the OA Administrative Coordinator

Dr. Patricia Houston embodies drive, passion, a focus on personal health and goodness to others. A recognized leader in the profession, she has increasingly expanded her sphere of influence, today leading the education portfolio at St Michael's Hospital, Toronto and soon to be taking on a new challenge as the Vice Dean, Undergraduate Medical Education for the University of Toronto. Our *Beyond the Mask* Strategic Consultant, Dr. Jane Cooke-Lauder, had an opportunity to speak with Dr. Houston and ask for reflections on her leadership roles over the years.



Dr. Houston didn't go into medical school thinking she would grow up to be leader. Rather, she took advantage of opportunities as they presented themselves: "Early in my career, a role opened as the medical director of the medical surgical ICU at the Toronto Western hospital... so I put my hand up. I found I very much enjoyed being a change agent and being able to have impact upon two important things at that time: patient care and outcomes and supporting a team approach to the care of critically ill patients. I did not see myself as the leader of the team but more as the collaborator that helped to bring all the voices to the table and empower everybody."

Dr. Houston is committed to life-long learning and to the belief that everyone is both a teacher and a learner. She reflected on her time at St. Michael's, helping lead change to their education program, "I was trying to bring different facets of education together instead of just focusing on medical education. I really was inspired and challenged by the opportunity to do something transformational, which is to look at the VP of Education role as being responsible for the education of everybody coming through the door. It was also about recognizing that everyone in the hospital has the ability to be a teacher, including the patients and their families."

Her philosophy about seizing the opportunity and ongoing learning come together in her leadership of the Choosing Wisely initiative. As the President of the CAS at that time, she saw in Choosing Wisely the opportunity to help educate, "There was an opportunity to help with educating the public and educating other health care practitioners about the need, or not the need, for different tests. Particularly focusing on perioperative testing that has been, to a large extent, ordered routinely." To Dr. Houston, Choosing Wisely encapsulates the idea of asking anesthesiologists to act as leaders within their own practices; and for chiefs to provide leadership by creating the appropriate education vehicles. In addition, Choosing Wisely presents an advocacy and a resource allocation opportunity: "We also have an ability to speak about how much it costs to do the testing and how every time we use dollars in a way that doesn't have impact, it's an opportunity cost. I think its not just around this idea *don't do it*, but also what will it allow you to do."

When asked for her advice to young anesthesiologists, Dr. Houston encourages them to find opportunities – and shared her belief that regardless of the environment, there are always opportunities provided one is not looking for a perfect fit. "The title of the campaign *Beyond the Mask*, I think what anesthesiologists have to do is to not just take the mask down but to open their eyes and broaden their horizons as to the potential where they can interact and engage with patients, with families, with the leadership in their hospital and with health systems transformation."

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Taking on roles outside the OR is not without its challenges, "In an academic setting or group practice there is more opportunity to make time for people to leave for meetings. Often meetings occur at terrible times of the day for anesthesiologists. How do you leave the operating room to do that? But I think you can be innovative about how you operate as a group, how you help each other to do that. And I think there is a need for all of us in formal leadership roles to identify opportunities for leadership in a way that's accessible for physicians who still have to manage a full time clinical practice."

Dr. Houston has been a true example of going *Beyond the Mask* during the course of her career, exemplifying leadership and innovation towards the development of our specialty. We thank her for her unique perspectives on the many different facets of the health care system and wish her the very best in her new Vice-Dean role at the University of Toronto. [Click here](#) for more information on the Choosing Wisely Campaign.