4-1-2005

A Talk With Alan Kelly: Part One

Helma Weeks
University of Pennsylvania

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/bellwether/vol1/iss61/10
For more information, please contact libraryrepository@pobox.upenn.edu.
A Talk with Alan Kelly

By Helma Weeks

Alan M. Kelly will step down as dean of the School on October 1, 2005, after nearly 12 years, including a first year as interim dean. University President Amy Gutman said, “Alan has made a tremendous impact on the School of Veterinary Medicine and will leave the School in exceptionally strong condition. We owe Alan an enormous debt of gratitude for his extraordinary leadership and service. He has been a wonderfully creative and energetic dean and has worked tirelessly and effectively to enhance the School’s reputation as the preeminent veterinary school in basic scientific research and superb clinical care. Throughout his tenure, Alan has worked successfully to solidify the School’s financial base.”

Dr. Kelly studied veterinary medicine at the School of Veterinary Science of the University of Bristol in Bristol, U.K. so he could “go into something like the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.” That didn’t come to pass as Alan came to Penn in 1962, within a month of graduating, on a National Cancer Institute fellowship. He stayed and was awarded a Ph.D. in pathology in 1967. He joined the School’s faculty and was appointed assistant professor in 1968. The rest is history. Alan never lost interest in issues of food supplies, epidemiology, and food safety. This served him well when as dean he had to appeal to the agriculture lobby for support of the Veterinary School to secure its funding. He could speak convincingly to the Pennsylvania legislators about the vital support role of veterinary medicine to Pennsylvania’s agriculture industry.

I sat down with Dr. Kelly recently for a conversation about his time as dean. Following are excerpts.

**HW:** When you became dean, the School’s financial picture was bleak. Governor Casey had proposed an $11-million budget, and then University President Hackney made some dire pronouncements about closing the School.

**AMK:** The University had a lobbyist in Harrisburg who proposed this as a tactic to try to get the legislature’s support. It was a very bad idea that seriously undermined faculty morale and gave the General Assembly in Harrisburg the impression that the University would sacrifice the Veterinary School to secure the University appropriation.

**HW:** How did you effect the change of thinking in Harrisburg and at the University level to secure stable funding?

**AMK:** Despite the tactics in Harrisburg, there was broad recognition in the University that the School was important. However, there were major difficulties in Harrisburg where the agricultural lobby, the School’s traditional base of support, were furious with the University, and especially President Hackney, for proposing to close the School. They saw this as an example of the lack of University support for the School.

Fortunately, when I became dean, Hackney had left for Washington and Claire Fagin was interim president. Claire is a wonderful lady whom I am very fond of. On a terribly cold day in January 1994, she came with me to a luncheon in Harrisburg where we met all the leaders of agriculture in the Commonwealth. Claire was spectacular; she apologized for what had transpired, assured them that the University valued the Veterinary School, and pledged that the University would never threaten to close the School again. The atmosphere had been icy up to this point, but Claire’s statement immediately made a huge difference in changing attitudes, and she made my life in Harrisburg much easier.

In 1994, there was a general University appropriation of about $30 million from the Commonwealth—roughly half went to the Veterinary School, and the rest went to the University. This is what Governor Casey wanted to cancel, and what legislators from throughout the Commonwealth complained about, as many had private universities in their districts that received nothing from the Commonwealth. So it was always a challenge. Incoming University President Judith Rodin rightfully decided that the University appropriation was going to be a continuing problem that soured the relations between Penn and the General Assembly and that the University would withdraw from its portion of the appropriation. She then said it was up to me and the School to apply for the entire $30 million since the legislature was much more amenable to seeing all the funds come to the Veterinary School. So this is what we set out to do.

Then, of course, there was Matt Ryan. What an unforgettable friend and supporter of the School; we could never have succeeded without him. Matt was not the Speaker [of the Pennsylvania House] at the time; the Republicans were in the minority, and Matt was their leader. He became Speaker in 1995 when Tom Ridge became Governor and Republicans took control of the House as well as the Senate.

**HW:** It looks like the climate for the School’s appropriations changed with Governor Ridge’s administration.

**AMK:** It was already improving and continued to greatly improve with Matt Ryan as Speaker; he was immensely powerful and was respected by everyone. We also had other good friends in the House and Senate who made a real difference. There was a general recognition that we are the Commonwealth’s only veterinary school, that we are a considerable asset to the Commonwealth and should be supported. It took a year or so, but with full support in Harrisburg, we gradually managed to capture the whole University appropriation.

“There was a general recognition that we are the Commonwealth’s only veterinary school, that we are a considerable asset to the Commonwealth and should be supported.”
Judy Rodin generously supported us throughout this transition. She has been a very good friend of the School.

One of the things I did that proved to be enormously important was to take Barry Stupin with me to Harrisburg; Barry loves politics, is very good at it, and he has street smarts that I don’t have. When you are in Harrisburg, it is never entirely clear what is going on, because there are lots of agendas. Things are never what they initially appear to be and it can be quite confusing. Barry and I would drive up there at least once a week, make our visits, and on the way back try to figure out what was really happening and what we had to do next. It was a lot of fun, and Barry was, and remains, a tremendous asset to the School both in Harrisburg and on campus.

**HW:** When you secured funding, you also secured funding for student scholarships.

**AMK:** I think in about 1997 we had told the legislature that we would do this. Initially it was $1,000 that we gave to every student who was a Pennsylvania resident. Then, as the size of our appropriation increased, it went up to $3,500. This was part of a plan we laid out for the legislature, showing how the money would be used if the appropriation was increased. We have adhered to this plan to the letter.

**HW:** Has this assistance impacted the student population? Were you able to attract more Pennsylvanians?

**AMK:** We always try to have between 60 and 70 percent Pennsylvania students at the School. In 1997 we were losing many to Ohio as tuition was cheaper even for an out-of-state student. We have helped to reverse this trend. The scholarships were also about the level of indebtedness students had at the end of four years with us.

**HW:** But the debt burden still is fairly high.

**AMK:** In real costs it is not as high today as in 1997. There is something I am quite proud of: if you look at the years from 1997 to 2003, not only did we give scholarships to residents of Pennsylvania, we also did not raise the cost of tuition above 2.9 percent, even though the University general admission was going up by 4 to 4.5 percent. We kept tuition level increases to a minimum, more or less tied to the Consumer Price Index, even though our rate of inflation for scientific equipment and supplies was significantly higher than that. So if you look from 1997 to 2003, and include the scholarships, tuition for residents of Pennsylvania at the School only went up 16 percent; it went up 32 percent for out-of-state residents. That’s a small increase when you compare it to any other institution of higher learning in the U.S. Undergraduate tuition at Penn went up by 45 percent during the same period. So, we have held the tuition rate down as much as possible, and that helped both in-state and out-of-state students.

**HW:** You have worked to increase the number of V.M.D./Ph.D. students. Has the program grown enough?

**AMK:** It hasn’t grown enough, but I am very pleased at the increase that has occurred. When we started out, we were getting one or two V.M.D./Ph.D students a year through NIH [National Institutes of Health] support of the program; I felt veterinary scientists were a disappearing breed. But Mike Atchison [director of the V.M.D./Ph.D. combined-degree program] has done an excellent job in turning this around, and I think we are now getting about five a year. It costs at least $260,000 to educate one of these students through the V.M.D. and the Ph.D. degrees. It’s an expensive program, but it is the best training in the world for somebody who wants to go into basic or clinical research in veterinary medicine. The School puts over $150,000 into the V.M.D./Ph.D. program per year, with the goal of increasing the program by two students a year, and now we have two Pfizer scholarships for underrepresented minorities. We are enormously grateful to Pfizer Animal Health and have recruited two outstanding minority students into the program as a result of their support.

**HW:** Is the program at Penn more dynamic than at other schools?

**AMK:** Most other veterinary schools are at land grant universities; they don’t have the huge biomedical research complex that we have on our doorstep. We are very lucky.

**HW:** Do you think four to five students a year is about right?

**AMK:** No, I would like more. There is an enormous problem in that there are not enough veterinary students going into research, and presently, there are not enough NIH grants going to veterinary graduates with Ph.D.s. I don’t know where the teaching personnel will come from in the next ten to 12 years. We are not producing them. Veterinary schools are increasingly populated by basic science faculty who are not veterinarians. They bring scientific rigor to the School, but we need to have veterinarians doing research and populating both the veterinary schools.

**HW:** But the debt burden still is fairly high.

**AMK:** We always try to have between 60 and 70 percent Pennsylvania students at the School. In 1997 we were losing many to Ohio as tuition was cheaper even for an out-of-state student. We have helped to reverse this trend. The scholarships were also about the level of indebtedness students had at the end of four years with us.

**HW:** But the debt burden still is fairly high.

**AMK:** In real costs it is not as high today as in 1997. There is something I am quite proud of: if you look at the years from 1997 to 2003, not only did we give scholarships to residents of Pennsylvania, we also did not raise the cost of tuition above 2.9 percent, even though the University general admission was going up by 4 to 4.5 percent. We kept tuition level increases to a minimum, more or less tied to the CPI is about right?
basic science and the clinical departments.

This is particularly important in clinical departments for there are so many opportunities and so many things that can be done using animal models, but these faculty need to be competitive for NIH funding.

HW: During your deanship, research funding at the School has increased.

AMK: When I was appointed dean, sponsored research funding at the School stood at $11.8 million, of which $7.4 million came from the NIH. Last year we secured $25.2 million in sponsored research funding, with $17.8 million from the NIH.

HW: Have you increased the number of faculty?

AMK: There was 112 faculty when I came in—we had approval for 116—and it is 131 today. It has not increased that much, when you think the appropriation has gone up threefold. We haven’t increased the faculty because you never know from one year to the next what the appropriation is going to be, so you try to minimize increases in fixed costs.

HW: It seems that more recruitment occurred in the basic sciences. Did you deliberately set out to increase the basic sciences faculty?

AMK: I am not sure that is correct. You have to look at the demographics of the different departments. There was more faculty coming to retirement age, particularly in Animal Biology, so there are new faculty in this department, but not more faculty. They keep reminding me of this, and I am sure they will do the same to my successor.

The other factor is that Animal Biology had space that could be renovated, whereas Pathobiology had almost no space that could be renovated for recruiting new faculty. I wanted both Pathobiology and Animal Biology to recruit faculty who, for example, had an interest related to oncology because I wanted to build a major oncology program here—we have an amazing opportunity. We have not been able to get the veterinary molecular oncologist to lead the program that I was seeking. Karen Sorenmo, head of the Section of Oncology, has done an outstanding job at building the program. She is an excellent clinician, but we also need a molecular oncologist who can link the two parts of the School and fully exploit our unique opportunity in this area. This is something I regret I haven’t accomplished. We tried and tried but there aren’t that many candidates.

(Part two will appear in the next edition of Bellwether.)

Class of 2006 White Coat Ceremony

The White Coat Ceremony, a tradition from medical schools first introduced in 2001 at Penn Veterinary Medicine, was held for the Class of 2006 in the Zellerbach Theater at the Annenberg Center on December 13, 2004. Many relatives and guests of the students attended the ceremony and the reception that followed.

The ceremony marks the end of the students’ training in the classroom, and the beginning of their clinical rotations, where they will apply knowledge they have learned during the first two-and-a-half years of their four-year veterinary education. The evening also marked the final time the entire class would be together formally before Commencement in the spring of 2006.

Speakers included Dean Alan M. Kelly; faculty members: Dr. Narayan Avadhani, chair, Department of Animal Biology; Thomas J. Van Winkle, V’75, professor of pathology; Gail K. Smith, V’74, chair, Department of Clinical Studies—Philadelphia; David M. Nunamaker, V’68, chair, Department of Clinical Studies—New Bolton Center; Gregg M. Arbittier, V’06, class president; Timothy J. Ireland, V’90, president-elect of the Pennsylvania Veterinary Medical Association; Jennifer A. Morris, V’99, of the Veterinary Medical Alumni Society; and Associate Dean Jeffrey A. Wortman, V’69. William T. N. Culp, V’04, an intern at the Ryan Hospital, spoke on “Graduation and Beyond.”

Sponsors of the ceremony included the Pennsylvania Veterinary Medical Association and several of its local constituent veterinary medical associations: Lehigh Valley, Suburban, and Western. The Veterinary Medical Alumni Society gave the students Penn brass pins to wear on their white coats.