

LSUHSC Chancellor  
DR. JOHN C. MCDONALD

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# STILL ON HIS FEET

attending to the health and  
well-being of medical center

Peek into Dr. John C. McDonald's office at LSU Health Sciences Center and most likely you'll see him standing at an antique drafting table as he prepares speeches or signs papers.

Standing to do important work seems natural for McDonald. After all, for nearly 40 years he was on his feet, mostly as a pioneering transplant surgeon. And even though the 71-year-old voluntarily stopped performing surgery last year, he is still on his feet, attending to the health and well being of a university medical center.

McDonald recently celebrated his first year as the first chancellor/dean of LSUHSC. In the past, the future of the medical center and school had been in the hands of leaders in Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Now, the

*Pioneering transplant surgeon likens first year as chancellor to a first-year internship with "an enormous learning curve."*

**By Alisa Stingley**

Shreveport campus can chart its own destiny.

"I think it is not unreasonable to think in a couple of decades we could be in the top 10 to 15 percent of medical centers in the country," McDonald said. "If we

have the right leadership, if we can be innovative, if we can do things we're capable of doing."

During this past June's commencement address he said, "The essence of a health sciences center is not brick and mortar, rather it is a living, breathing organism. It is a place where dreams can and do become reality."

It is also a place of enormous responsibility — 5,000 employees, 400 medical school students and an operating budget of \$265 million. McDonald likens his first year as chancellor to a first-year internship.

"I've been on an enormous learning curve. As a surgical person I've not been as diplomatic as I should have been. I'm educable," he said. "This is kind of a different game."

Colleagues, though, praise his first year.

"I think he has accomplished more than anyone has a right to expect, given the fact this is a new job and he took it at a time when money is not plentiful," said Dr. Roy Clay, associate dean for clini-

cal affairs and medical director of LSU Hospital. "I think he provided leadership to the campus at a time of change. He assuaged worries of the faculty as to where it was going. He has brought the faculty into the picture."

Clay was chairman of the search committee for a new vice chancellor before the chancellorship was created. McDonald was being considered for the vice chancellor job; when the structure changed, the committee unanimously recommended him for chancellor.

"He has the ability to analyze problems," Clay said. "Above all, he has determination to make the program work."

Dr. Kevin Sittig, director of the Regional Burn Center and president of the general faculty, said McDonald has been an advocate for faculty and support remains strong.

"He's kept the faculty completely informed," Sittig said. "We are feeling we are in the loop now."

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## McDonald up close

**Birthplace:** Baldwyn, Miss.

**Marital status:** Married, three children.

**Education:** B.S. degree from Mississippi College; M.D. from Tulane University School of Medicine.

**Career highlights:** head, section of transplantation, State University of New York at Buffalo and Meyer Memorial Hospital; director, Louisiana Organ Procurement Agency; professor of surgery, Tulane University; professor and chairman, LSUHSC-Shreveport Department of Surgery; director, LSUHSC/Willis-Knighton Regional Transplant Center; acting vice chancellor and dean, LSUHSC-Shreveport.

# McDonald: His true calling he says is teaching

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## Father figure

The chancellor's office at LSUHSC is spacious but not ostentatious. One wall is filled with medical textbooks. Another is covered with photographs, and on another is a large painting of a Shreveport street scene by watercolorist Frances O'Callaghan, wife of Dennis O'Callaghan, head of microbiology/immunology.

For an interview, McDonald settled behind an uncluttered desk, occasionally fiddling with a pipe. He has a commanding presence, one that executive secretary Jere Bellar said "radiates authority."

But, added Bellar, who has worked for McDonald nearly 22 years, "people don't realize all the sides of him. He's very authoritative and professional but he's open to anybody walking into his office any time, from the janitor to faculty. He is open to anyone who needs him."

Sittig, who trained under McDonald, said McDonald treats young doctors in a fatherly way. "He comes across as very powerful, an almost unapproachable individual because of his status," Sittig said. "But once you get to know him personally, he is a father figure to the surgeons. There's a genuine feeling of admiration."

McDonald's achievements were seeded in a most unlikely place — a small town in impoverished north-east Mississippi. McDonald's father, who was a barber and then a dry-cleaner, died at 52, when McDonald was only 12. With two siblings several years older, he lived the life of an only child.

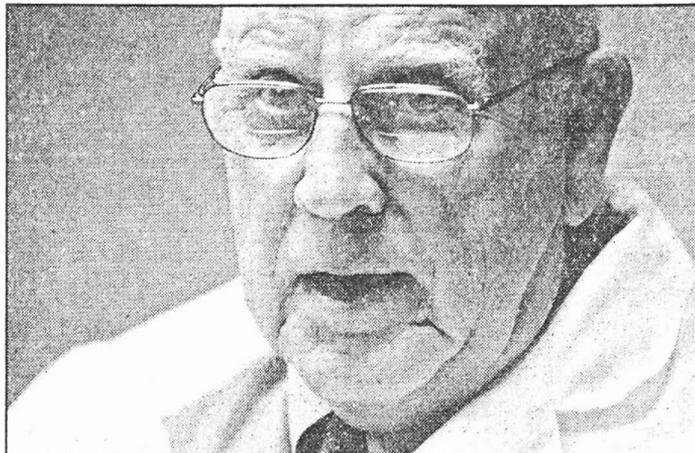
Times were hard. "I think certainly in today's world we would have been considered below the poverty line," he said. "In a farming community people are always dropping by this or that. I never felt deprived in any way, but there were a lot of things we didn't do — nice vacations ... we didn't have an automobile, those sorts of things."

A family doctor lived across the street. His role in the community left a strong impression on young McDonald.

"I guess it was my respect for him that led me to think that might be a useful thing to do with your life," he said.

Others in the community influenced him as well: Though only 26 were in his senior class, he was well-prepared for college by exceptional teachers, he said, and the culture of the community had an impact too.

"I grew up in a fundamentalist, Protestant, Baptist church. My mother was in church every time the door opened," McDonald said. "The pastor's wife was very devoted to teenagers, and one of the things taught was that no matter what you did in



Matthew Minard/The Times

Dr. John McDonald will receive the Roswell Park Medal next spring, given by the Buffalo Surgical Society for significant contributions to the art and science of surgery.

life, the influence or impact of what you did was the important thing."

McDonald graduated from a small Baptist college before going to Tulane University School of Medicine. He envisioned himself either as a family doctor or a medical school teacher. But his surgery residency, in the late '50s and early '60s in Buffalo, N.Y., altered the course of his life.

An influential professor suggested McDonald consider the new field of transplantation.

"The few of us in that business at that time, we kind of felt like we were walking on water," said McDonald, who performed the second kidney transplant ever done in New York State.

During his career, he performed between 1,000 and 2,000 kidney, liver and pancreas transplants. Clay recalled how even one long, difficult transplant in particular did not slow McDonald's drive.

"We finished up the operation and he had to be exhausted. He looked around and said, 'Where's the coffee?' I said, 'Drink that before you go home.' His answer was, 'Go to bed? The day is just beginning.' He proceeded to work a full day after that ... he outlasted everybody."

## Trying time

McDonald had come to LSUHSC in 1977 as chairman of the surgery department. Clay remembered how supportive McDonald was when Clay took over surgical activities at E.A. Conway Regional Medical Center in Monroe, also part of the LSU system.

"He came over there essentially every week as the program was getting started to provide additional coverage and expertise because I was there by myself. He wants to be there and make sure it's done correctly. At the same time, he encourages you. He doesn't smother you."

The late 1970s and '80s, though, were a trying time for the medical school and center as it struggled to overcome state budget crises and a charity hospital image.

"When I came here ... from time to time in the first year or two I would be referred a patient for some special purpose and almost inevitably one of the first things they would ask me would be, do you operate anywhere else?" McDonald said. "But it's been 10 years since anyone asked me that. Patients come here, they are well treated."

McDonald decided in late 2000 to stop performing surgery.

"There didn't seem to be anything wrong with my mind, but I was tired. Surgery ... requires the ability to function for protracted periods of time. I was fine for three to four hours, but in the last year or so, I noticed if I got over four to five hours, I began to think, how am I going to get out of here? I didn't think that was healthy."

He did not want to do surgery part time. "If I was a patient, I wouldn't want a part-time surgeon," McDonald said. "I just thought it was time to quit. That made it easier for me to undertake this. Although I miss surgery and making rounds and patient relationships, there's a time for everything."

But he does not leave surgery without recognition from peers. McDonald recently learned he is the 55th recipient of the Roswell Park Medal, awarded annually by the Buffalo Surgical Society to a recipient who has contributed significantly to the art and science of surgery. Previous winners include Dr. Michael DeBakey and Dr. Denton Cooley.

## New set of challenges

In the late summer of 2000, two dozen community leaders made a bus trip to Baton Rouge to show sup-

port for a Shreveport chancellor. And the LSU Board of Supervisors agreed. The supporters celebrated with fine French champagne.

McDonald took the chancellor job, he said, because "the faculty seemed to want me to do it ... I had been on this property at that time 23 years, had been making lots of judgments and had lots of arguments and have had times in which my concepts or my intentions were in conflict with other members of the faculty. To do that for 23 years and still have them have enough confidence in you to do this was, I thought, an encouragement."

When named chancellor in November of 2000, McDonald acquired a new set of challenges. Over 10 years, LSUHSC had sent about \$60 million in self-generated funds to the LSUHSC-New Orleans complex.

Because the Shreveport campus made money from its hospital, the state saw little need to pump large amounts of money into the facility. Now McDonald and others are lobbying for more state investment in hospital equipment and research development.

"If the hospital gets better and better and attracts more and more people for complex or innovative therapy, sooner or later the hospital may be able to carry the medical school," he said. "We're not able to do that today."

Going into his second year as chancellor, McDonald is at the helm as milestones are being achieved. Ground was recently broken for the \$14 million Feist-Weiller Cancer Center. And in October LSUHSC was named industry of the year by the Greater Shreveport Chamber of Commerce.

But McDonald still makes time in his schedule for what he considers his true calling — teaching. He meets once a week with surgery residents to go over cases.

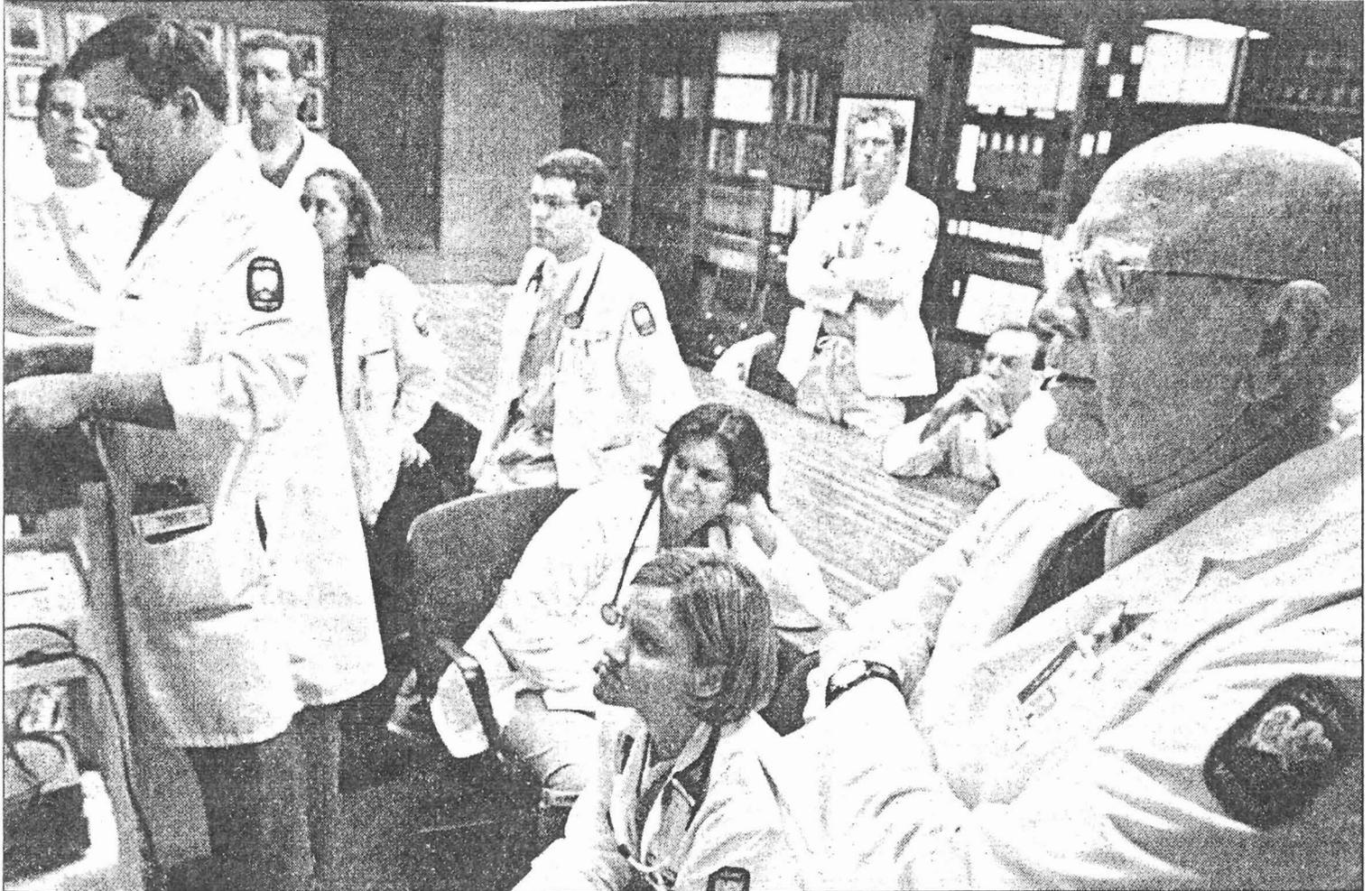
"He remains committed to that even though he doesn't have to," said Bellar. "He wanted to continue to do that to keep in touch with the residents. Nothing is to interfere with that. He truly is a teacher."

McDonald said the fact his career hasn't been built on becoming an administrator has been an advantage. "I felt like I could do what I thought was the right thing to do, unrelated to how it might work out politically."

He added, "The worst deans I ever saw were people whose primary purpose was to continue to be dean. I don't belong in that category."

McDonald looks at his life and career with a philosophy honed by experience, and, undoubtedly, his upbringing.

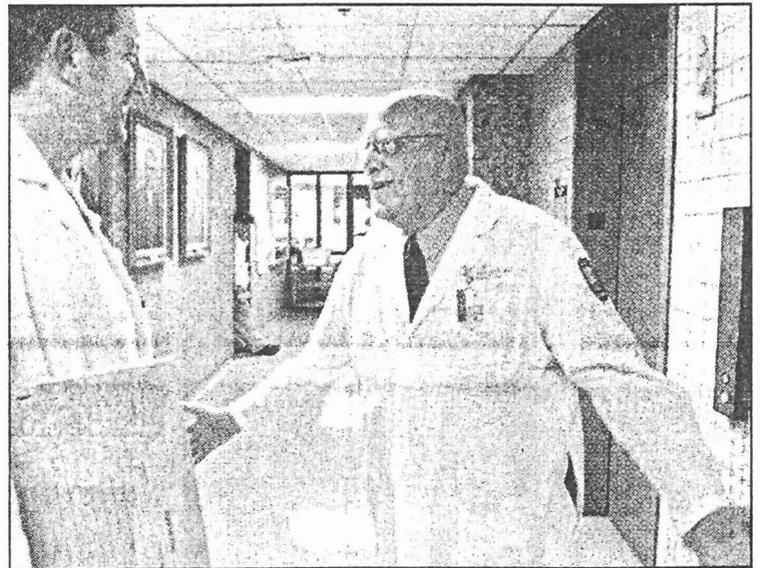
"There are happy people and unhappy people. Happy people feel good about what they are doing," he said, "or they change it."



Dr. John McDonald (right), chancellor/dean of LSU Health Sciences Center in report, still sets aside time to go over cases each week with young doc-

tors. McDonald had been chief of surgery before becoming the center's first chancellor last year. "This is a terribly important time for the school," he says.

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Matthew Minard/The Times

Surgical officer Dr. Todd Kupferman (left) and McDonald share a joke after a meeting. McDonald said he believes LSUHSC has the potential to be one of the top medical centers in the country.