We welcomed Lehigh Valley Health Network Chief Transformation Officer Debbie Salas-Lopez, MD, MPH, and Medtronic Value-Based Healthcare Partnerships leader Christian Howell to share their thoughts on what it takes to form a value-based strategic partnership.

Last February, Medtronic and Allentown, Pennsylvania-based Lehigh Valley Health Network (LVHN) announced a five-year strategic partnership aimed at developing value-based solutions to improve healthcare outcomes for LVHN patients. This first-of-its-kind partnership is bringing together the technology-generated insights and operational efficiency expertise of Medtronic with the clinical delivery expertise of LVHN. The effort supports a long-term shared goal to positively impact up to 500,000 patients while reducing LVHN’s cost of care by nearly $100 million.

What drew Medtronic and LVHN together?

Dr. Salas-Lopez: It’s no secret the healthcare environment is challenging; our operating margins are shrinking and at the same time, patient care is becoming increasingly complex. We knew we couldn’t address this alone. We needed to find the right partner. We thought, “Who has the depth, breadth, and mission that matches ours?” That turned out to be Medtronic. We heard Medtronic leadership speak about value-based healthcare, and we knew they were speaking the same language as we do at LVHN. It also helped that Medtronic has experience with health systems outside the U.S. and can bring these global competencies to the table.

Howell: Our CEOs have each been speaking the value-based healthcare language for some time, understanding that it is truly the way forward. We appreciated that LVHN has a clear commitment to thinking differently, to trying new things — a mindset that is perfect for codeveloping and piloting programs across multiple disease states aimed at delivering quality care that costs less.

What is required for a healthcare provider and a medtech supplier to be successful in a partnership?

Howell: There first must be an ideological connection. Our leaders have a shared commitment to creating new models of care based on improved patient outcomes. For us, it means thinking beyond selling devices to looking at the broader picture and how we can help the provider achieve better patient outcomes at lower costs. Beyond that, the willingness to share data is foundational. Without it, we cannot measure outcomes or create a more connected and coordinated health system.

Dr. Salas-Lopez: It must be a partnership that goes beyond just a financial transaction. Rather, it should focus on how we can measure, track, and develop greater analytical capabilities that focus on improving patient outcomes to deliver greater value to our patients. It takes a shared vision and commitment. That commitment must flow through each level of both organizations, across clinicians and administrators, with a willingness to each hold ourselves accountable to delivering the highest quality of care.
“A partnership should focus on how we can measure, track, and develop greater analytical capabilities that focus on improving patient outcomes to deliver greater value to our patients.”
Debbie Salas-Lopez, MD, MPH
Chief Transformation Officer at LVHN

How do you define partnership success?

Dr. Salas-Lopez: It’s about working together to improve patient outcomes and lower the overall cost of care and asking ourselves, “Are our efforts meeting the triple aim of improving the patient care experience, improving the health of the community, and reducing the cost of care?” If we can say yes to all three, I’d say the partnership is successful.

Howell: We will know our partnership is successful when we truly understand LVHN’s challenges and can work in sync to tackle them. It’s collaborating to positively impact patient outcomes and costs, whether through our data insights, our technologies, or our expertise at boosting both hospital and clinic operational efficiency.

How have you transitioned the partnership from theory into practice?

Dr. Salas-Lopez: Let’s take data analytics as an example. We have our LVHN CIO and Medtronic data scientists working side-by-side, thinking about how to use analytics to improve patient care. We do “value checks” at each point in a process and ask, “Is this producing value?” We’re applying a robust data analytics process to help drive the right intervention, with the right cohort, with the right condition, at the right value.

Howell: Both organizations have put operating structures in place to initiate programs in this partnership. There’s a governance model with executive and steering committees that brings in different thought leaders to help steer programs in the right direction. We’re very selective about the programs we are focusing on. Communication has been key. Our teams have been great at sharing goals and reporting on progress.

Dr. Salas-Lopez: We are currently putting a program through this model to reduce respiratory compromise. It’s a patient safety issue; you don’t want patients to go into respiratory failure after intubation. Medtronic has a program and a technology solution that can determine proactively whether a patient is at risk for respiratory failure. We are seeing if we can prove the value proposition of using this technology. Can we improve care and lower costs? We can then apply this approach to other conditions.

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Christian Howell
Vice President of Value-Based Healthcare Partnerships at Medtronic, Americas Region

The partnership is now at the one-year mark. What have been your key learnings so far?

Howell: This partnership is a totally new way of working. One key learning has been overcoming our competing priorities. We’ve been learning how to respect LVHN’s priorities and to find ways to bring resources to help them address their needs while remaining focused on delivering value in outcomes and costs.

Dr. Salas-Lopez: Our key learning has been about how to live within today’s fee-for-service world while also thinking about value-based care. How do we develop the competencies needed to usher in value-based care? We’ve found that it’s about using data analytics, tracking and measuring outcomes, determining value to our patients and our systems, engaging people, and having transparency in terms of goals. It’s also about agility and adaptability — the ability to pivot and think about something that’s not in your market now, but will be in the future and that is value-based healthcare.
Debbie Salas-Lopez, MD, MPH, is Chief Transformation Officer at LVHN and a professor of medicine at the University of South Florida, Morsani College of Medicine and the College of Public Health. In 2009, she was appointed the Leonard Parker Pool Chair of Medicine, where she served until 2015 as the only Latina chair of medicine in the continental United States. Dr. Salas-Lopez has been a standing reviewer for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) study sections with a focus on primary care, health literacy and access. In her current role, she is responsible for Community Health, Population Health and the newly established Air Products Center for Connected Care and Innovation.

Christian Howell is Vice President of Value-Based Healthcare Partnerships at Medtronic for the Americas Region. He is responsible for developing strategic partnerships with leading health systems and advancing the company’s value-based healthcare strategy. In this role, he establishes and manages key relationships with various stakeholders throughout healthcare systems, developing innovative ways to leverage the company’s full product portfolio, services, and business programs to support a value-based healthcare environment. Christian has been with Medtronic for 15 years and was previously the Area Vice President of Sales for the Minimally Invasive Therapies Group.