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HIGH PROFILE

John Kastanis Has a Finger on the Pulse of Healthcare

BY TODD SHAPIRO

John Kastanis didn't think riding horses would lead him down the path he has traveled.

There was no way to know his decision to follow his passion for the equestrian life would set the stage for a four-decade career in the healthcare industry, one in which he would be a drug and alcohol counselor, a high-level administrator, on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic and now looking at the emerging use of Artificial Intelligence in healthcare.

"It began with me foolishly partnering with a friend to own a horse," says Kastanis. "I subsequently moved upstate and joined my friend to operate an addiction services program, while also serving as a drug and alcohol counselor. I began to see the possibilities and the needs of those who sought counseling."

Kastanis made his first mark in the healthcare industry when he co-authored New York's first drunk-driving education program, geared toward those who were facing their first offense. The program was groundbreaking, providing an opportunity to determine "those who had a true drug or alcohol problem, but also those who just made a bad decision or mistake," says Kastanis. In 1976, New York State mandated the program be put into place statewide.

The work he did inspired Kastanis to continue growing in the healthcare industry. He moved forward and earned his MBA from Baruch College-Mount Sinai School of Medicine.

Kastanis has a proven record of success with financial turnarounds, mergers, corporate restructurings, integrated delivery network development, labor-management negotiations and performance improvement. His demonstrated ability to deliver results, motivate staff and drive new growth has benefited several health organizations. His core expertise is in strategic planning, governance, fund development and academic medicine, while also managing large Medicaid and Medicare patient populations.

More recently, as president and CEO at University Hospital in Newark, New Jersey, Kastanis led the state's primary teaching hospital and clinical research site for Rutgers New Jersey Medical School, the state's only Northern New Jersey Level 1 Trauma Center and the EMS 911 service for the City of Newark. A leader in healthcare delivery systems, Kastanis has also served as president and CEO at



JOHN KASTANIS

COURTESY JOHN KASTANIS

Temple University Hospital, and the Hospital for Joint Diseases Orthopedic Institute, among several others.

"I had a mentor earlier in my career, George Vecchione," says Kastanis. "He had strong experience as a CPA, an auditor, executive and we built a successful hospital. I learned a great deal from my time working with George."

Kastanis and his family have owned a home in Southampton for 25 years, and in 2005 he brought his expertise to the East End when he was asked to act as the interim CEO of Southampton Hospital. Kastanis said the importance of the hospital cannot be overstated.

"Simply put, the East End could not survive without Southampton Hospital," he says. "Any form of trauma — a heart attack, an accident — Southampton Hospital is the first line of care."

While interim CEO, Kastanis leaned on his past successes in building bridges between hospitals to increase the level of care for patients and provide staff with more resources. His deal to affiliate Southampton with Stony Brook Hospital is pivotal to the hospital's growth.

"The patients benefit from more access to care, and it goes beyond that," says Kastanis. "Strategic partnerships help smaller, more rural hospitals through increased capital, recruitment and purchasing power when it comes to equipment, medicines and other resources. That helps hospital morale."

As large hospital and healthcare groups continue to acquire smaller physician practices, a trend Kastanis calls the "Pac-Man-type phenomenon," the healthcare industry is facing a historic need for more doctors and nurses. Mergers and acquisitions result in stronger financial muscle, better leverage in negotiating reimbursement rates and more access to specialists. The introduction of telehealth has also been a game-changing development in the industry.

But it was the COVID-19 pandemic that challenged the industry, almost to the breaking point. Kastanis had a front-row seat as the pandemic raged. He was asked by the Greater New York Hospital Association to be their liaison at the Jacob Javits Center in Manhattan while it was used as an outpost for COVID patients. When the federal government sent the USS Comfort, a highly advanced floating hospital, Kastanis helped manage patient flow. The ship was

famously underused because it was not an environment conducive to COVID-19 care.

"Those ships are floating Petri dishes and there would be no way to contain the disease," says Kastanis. "EMS still had patients who needed different care for other health emergencies. People still had heart attacks or other trauma, and also an overwhelming COVID need."

Kastanis has a hard time putting into words the burnout that doctors, nurses, administrators and first responders faced during the pandemic. It was a massive response that called for very comprehensive and detailed coordination, but the constant evolution of protocols and mandates also resulted in a crushing cash situation facing hospitals overrun by COVID patients.

"We needed PPE, ventilators, so many things," says Kastanis. "We would be on the phone regularly, with a group of the five major hospitals in the Greater New York Area, trying to manage their huge cash burn, due to the onslaught of COVID patients, while patients with other needs were still seeking medical help."

The pandemic served to reinforce the philosophies that Kastanis has used to guide his efforts as a healthcare industry professional.

"Hospitals operate through some of the most complex management challenges than any business on Earth. More than any corporation or large operation," says Kastanis. "It is labor intensive, heavily regulated and demands the highest standards."

The goal of this philosophy is to provide the best environment for healthcare professionals who then can do the jobs of caring for people.

"That's the bottom line. We have to care for people," says Kastanis. "Without high morale or the correct resources, that becomes a challenge."

With the advent of AI being used in the industry, Kastanis will never be convinced that technology can substitute the human aspect of caring for patients.

"In the end, medical care is of course a science. But it is also a true art form," says Kastanis. "Even if a diagnosis may seem routine, every patient is different. Every doctor is different. You cannot ever replace the human element of healthcare. Doctors need camaraderie to deal with tough days or to discuss patients and care with other professionals. Technology won't change that."

Kastanis is now a principal at JNK Consulting, specializing in healthcare administration and management.

When out east, he and his wife enjoy the bucolic surroundings of Southampton, often watching the sun rise and set from the sands of Flying Point Beach. He is still an active equestrian, playing polo often. It is a long way from the painful days of the COVID-19 response, but the lessons will always remain.

"Healthcare is a never-ending struggle, always progressing," says Kastanis. "There are so many brilliant doctors and nurses. They need all of the tools we can give them to provide every person with the best healthcare possible. That is the mission."

Todd Shapiro is an award-winning publicist and associate publisher of Dan's Papers.