

University of Minnesota's new medical dean brings infusion of energy

Dr. Jakub Tolar promises to raise U's profile at high-stakes time.

By [Jeremy Olson](#) Star Tribune

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If “row the boat” is now the official mantra of the University of Minnesota football team under its head coach, it might also be the unofficial creed of the medical school under its new dean, Dr. Jakub Tolar.

The 51-year-old Czech immigrant literally rows to campus in warm months. But like a coach, he's also promising teamwork that can boost the prestige and performance of an institution that trains 70 percent of Minnesota's doctors and accounts for about a quarter of the university's federal grant funding.

“I don't ever abdicate responsibility,” Tolar said, “but I can delegate and I surround myself with very good people, very smart people, very loyal people ... who understand they're not pouring fluid in small vials for a living. No, they're actually curing cancer.”

Tolar's high-energy leadership paid off as director of the university's Stem Cell Institute, which among other things has pioneered a stem cell therapy for the treatment of a severe and often terminal skin disease, and inspired a \$2.4 million gift from the Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation to advance its work.

Whether he can replicate that success in his new position is an open question, as the school has a history of deans coming in with optimism and being hindered by ethics controversies and financial challenges. Tolar said he believes the school is poised for a boost in academic standing and research funding. While it is a major Minnesota magnet for federal funding — last year it pulled in more than \$140 million from the National Institutes of Health alone — it has struggled to maintain its national research ranking. The medical school is ranked seventh for primary education but 44th for research by U.S. News and World Report.

Tolar was named dean only a week after his predecessor, Dr. Brooks Jackson, left for a comparable academic position at the University of Iowa. The speed of the transition caught some off-guard. Iowa conducted a yearlong search before hiring Jackson.



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Dr. Jakub Tolar performed an examination on Theo Fulgencio, an 8-year-old patient from Rio de Janeiro suffering from epidermolysis bullosa. Tolar oversaw Theo's bone marrow transplant 36 days ago.

U President Eric Kaler said Tolar was a logical choice, as campus leaders advocated for him after Jackson's departure. The president also said he worried that Tolar would become dean at another major academic medical school if he didn't receive the opportunity here.

"We have a person who is going to be a terrific medical school dean somewhere," Kaler said. "This is a great opportunity to promote Jakub and take advantage of his tremendous leadership talents."

Troubled years

Jackson got similar praise when he was recruited from the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, where he had been an internationally known researcher in the field of HIV prevention and treatment.

But the medical school faced ethics questions during his tenure, as leaders atoned for the conduct of a university psychiatric drug study years earlier that involved the suicide of a patient with schizophrenia. Then abortion opponents raised questions about the sources and disposal methods of tissue obtained from aborted fetuses for university research.

Faculty turnover in departments such as bioethics and anesthesiology caused additional tensions, as did failed negotiations to merge the medical school with Fairview Health, the large Minnesota hospital and clinic system.

Fairview's chief executive, James Hereford said the merger talks, which restarted this summer, will benefit from Tolar's fresh eyes and from the quick transition to a new dean. The goal of the merger is to increase clinical revenue to support the U's research, while boosting Fairview's standing and specialization as a health care provider.

"He's a terrific leader," Hereford said. "It will take us coming together in partnership to really position the organization where it needs to be."

Tolar already was vice dean, and observers said he was taking on many tasks at the medical school because Jackson was heavily involved in bogged-down merger talks.

Onstage with Pearl Jam

Tolar earned his doctorate at the U in the mid-1990s and was a postdoctoral researcher, pediatric resident, and transplantation fellow before he became an assistant professor in 2003.

The university's achievements in stem cell transplantation — which started decades ago with bone marrow transplants before the concept of stem cells was well-defined — motivated Tolar to stay. He took charge of the Stem Cell Institute in 2014.

Tolar said the U can only learn and move forward from its past struggles. He plans to take advantage of the proximity of the medical school to engineering and other schools by motivating colleagues to work together, training junior scientists to be ambitious. If they succeed, he said, more money from grants and donations will follow.

“I am incredibly competitive,” he said. “I am not ashamed of this. I like to win. I like the medical school to win. In order to do this, we have to be better than others.”

Tolar has fans among patients, faculty, donors and even occasionally the odd celebrity. Pearl Jam lead singer Eddie Vedder introduced Tolar and invited him onstage during a concert St. Paul in 2014 — then gave Tolar the microphone before thousands of music-goers.

“I am a bone-marrow transplant physician,” Tolar said in what was becoming a buzzkill moment for the rock crowd. Then he said, “and what I do for a living has lots to do with what he does for a living. What we both do is give people hope!”

The crowd roared.

Pediatric patients receiving stem cell transplants, such as Jonathan Pitre, have come to relish weekly visits from Tolar. Pitre, who suffers from a disease that prevents his skin from healing, has been writing a science fiction novel and peppers Tolar with questions to make sure his descriptions of science are realistic.

“They’re almost soulmates,” said Pitre’s mother Tina Boileau.

Tolar said he intends to continue to see patients and conduct research. He remains in charge of the Stem Cell Institute. Rowing to work might take a hit, he admitted, due to later hours and fundraising events. He hopes his example will inspire, though.

“I spent two hours this morning writing my RO1 [federal grant application],” Tolar said during an 8 a.m. interview. “Everybody needs to do this.”

Dr. Jakub Tolar

Age: 51

Birthplace: Czech Republic

Title: Dean of the Medical School, vice president for Health Sciences,
director of the University of Minnesota Stem Cell Institute

Training: Charles University, Prague (medical school); University of Minnesota (doctorate)

Family: Married with three children

Hobbies: Rowing

Fans: Eddie Vedder and Pearl Jam