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With 53 years and counting in Dallas, here's what's new and what's ahead for Cooper Clinic

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David Moreno

Dr. Camron Nelson is the CEO of Cooper Clinic in Dallas. He has been with the health provider since 2001.

For more than 50 years, Cooper Clinic has been a medical staple for communities in North Dallas. Founded in 1970 by "Father of

Aerobics” Dr. Kenneth H. Cooper, the clinic offers a variety of medical services including breast health, cardiology, preventive dermatology, optometry and nutrition services.

In 1968, Dr. Cooper coined the term ‘aerobics’ with his medical book of the same name. The book discussed the benefits of doing aerobic exercise to improve health. Aerobics has sold more than 30 million copies worldwide.

Dr. Tyler Cooper, son of Dr. Kenneth Cooper, is the current CEO and president of Cooper Aerobics.

“This organization was founded upon a hypothesis that exercise is good for your health, and as crazy as that sounds, it was not obvious in the 60s,” Dr. Tyler Cooper said. “In fact, the medical community in the early 70s tried to shut down my father.”

Cooper Aerobics Center, which has over 450 employees, is made up of six other entities: Cooper Institute, Cooper Fitness Center, Cooper Spa, Cooper Hotel, Cooper Complete Vitamins and Cooper Wellness Strategies.

Since March 2010, Dr. Camron Nelson has served as the CEO and president of Cooper Clinic, an entity within the 30-acre Cooper Aerobics Center located at 12200 Preston Road.

“We focus on preventive medicine,” said Dr. Nelson, who joined the clinic in 2001. “We spend a lot of time educating people about their health, where they are and where they need to be.”

The clinic pushed ahead with a new vertical in July 2022. Cooper Clinic added sleep medicine, led by physician Dr. Sonya Merrill, to its services to treat various sleep conditions. About 30 million people in the U.S. have sleep apnea, but only 6 million are diagnosed with the condition, according to the American Medical Association.

Dr. Nelson sat down with the *Dallas Business Journal* to discuss Cooper Clinic’s legacy, the addition of sleep medicine and plans for growth.

Last year, Cooper Clinic added its newest service: sleep medicine. Why was it important to expand to sleep medicine?

Sleep is probably the most highly underrated health commodity that is just hardly talked about. Just this last year, sleep was ranked right up there with cholesterol and blood pressure as a cardiac risk factor. If people are not getting adequate sleep, there's a lot of things that go the wrong direction. There's also a percentage of people that have sleep apnea, which is where they quit breathing in the middle of the night.

We brought on Dr. Sonya Merrill and with that, there's a need and a demand in Dallas for a good sleep lab. In our Cooper Hotel, we've converted two rooms into sleep labs with all the monitoring and IT stuff that goes along with that.

The country has faced health care staffing shortages since the pandemic. Is this an issue Cooper Clinic is facing?

On the physician side, it didn't really make a difference. If anything, we found physicians that were disenchanted with the way primary medicine went during Covid.

On the staff side, there was a little bit of time that our HR team struggled to get the right people in slots, but that's not the case anymore. For the last six months, we've been able to fill spots readily with people in the medical field. Mainstream medicine is so overwhelmed and pressed upon that people look for a different venue where they can take time with patients and do the kind of service we do.

You mentioned people feeling pressed upon by 'mainstream medicine.' What are some solutions to improve the health care industry?

It's increasingly difficult for people to get into being a primary care physician. The medical education systems are working on it, but getting more primary care providers would be a part of that solution.

Payment systems within medicine are also difficult. If you're in primary care and you're not seeing a patient every 10 minutes, you're going to have a tough time based on reimbursement models. That sounds odd, but that's really the way things are.

You've been serving as CEO of Cooper Clinic for over 10 years but have been with the health system for 22 years. How else would you like to grow Cooper Clinic?

I would love to see this place continue to be the shining star that it is. There have been requests over the years to replicate Cooper at a number of places around the country, and it's not all about that. Dr. Cooper's passion is about getting this message out to broader audiences, so that people take ownership of their own health.

We have never grown exponentially here, and that's on purpose. We grow organically. My goal for the next year would be to add one additional doctor.

What legacy do you believe Dr. Kenneth Cooper has left in Dallas since opening Cooper Clinic over 50 years ago?

I'm very honored by what Dr. Cooper started 53 years ago. Dr. Cooper's passion is for people to take ownership of their own health. Not only do you get a better quality of life, you live longer and you spend less money on your health care.

If he had started this with a pure profit motive, I don't think it would have succeeded. He started with the firm belief that he could change health care and change lives by teaching, and he still has that at age 92.

This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.



David Moreno

Staff Writer - *Dallas Business Journal*

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From left to right: Dr. Tyler Cooper, CEO of Cooper Aerobics Center, Dr. Kenneth Cooper, founder of Cooper Aerobics, and Dr. Camron Nelson, CEO of Cooper Clinic.

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