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Mike Cote's Business Editor's Notebook: Veteran TV reporter relishes new role in world of health care

☒ WMUR's McElveen named VP at Dartmouth-Hitchcock

FOR NEARLY a decade, Josh McElveen has been a familiar face to New Hampshire TV viewers, who have watched him anchor newscasts, interview presidential candidates and moderate debates on WMUR.

When he appears in public now he'll be talking about health, not politics. This month, the veteran journalist joined Dartmouth-Hitchcock as vice president for communications and marketing. He'll be overseeing how the Lebanon-based health care provider presents itself as a statewide entity, how it handles media inquiries and how it responds to public health issues, such as the opioid epidemic.

McElveen joins the health care industry as it prepares for yet another shift in national policy and responds to increasing competition, which is prompting providers to create partnerships to consolidate their offerings. For New Hampshire providers, that means being able to offer more patients comprehensive care without requiring a trip to Boston. We caught up with McElveen recently after his first week on the job. The former political director for the Manchester ABC affiliate oversees a staff of about two dozen communications professionals.

"News is about messaging. I see this job a lot about messaging, too," McElveen said during an interview at the Union Leader. "At first, I felt like I needed to have a degree in medicine, or at least a strong background in medicine. And the more I realized that I didn't, the more appealing it became, and the more I felt like I could do this." Dartmouth-Hitchcock is New Hampshire's largest health system, with nearly 400 beds and 9,100 employees. It provides access to more than 1,000 primary care doctors and specialists through its flagship Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, the Norris Cotton Cancer Center, the Children's Hospital at Dartmouth-Hitchcock and affiliate hospitals in Lebanon, Keene, New London and Windsor, Vt.

Dartmouth-Hitchcock also works through the Visiting Nurse and Hospice of Vermont and New Hampshire and operates 24 clinics in the two states. The nonprofit is conducting a national search to replace its CEO and president, Dr. James N. Weinstein, who retires on June 30. McElveen believes his background as a journalist will help him better navigate a complex subject and interpret it for consumers. "I've had a lot of people say to me, 'It's going to take you awhile to learn the language and determine what the lingo is and that sort of thing,'" said McElveen, 45. "And that's true, but I actually think the language needs to change a little bit because so many people are in the dark about their own health care. It's stunning."

McElveen said making the move began with conversations he had with John Kacavas, chief legal officer and general counsel for Dartmouth-Hitchcock. "I knew him from various roles he has played, and we'd always have conversations about health care. It just kind of evolved into a

discussion about theory and the landscape of health care," McElveen said. "It kind of became applied theory, and the next thing you know, we were talking about John Broderick, Justice Broderick, coming on board. Suddenly it became very real."

The former New Hampshire Supreme Court chief justice is joining Dartmouth-Hitchcock as its senior director for public affairs. Broderick has advocated for mental-health care reform through the Campaign to Change Direction New Hampshire. "He really has his finger on the pulse of one of the most important issues facing the state. You can't look at the opioid crisis and mental health in vacuums. They are connected," McElveen said. "I don't know if enough of a connection has been made between the two, but people are talking about it. And that's largely because of Justice Broderick."

Marines and media

While McElveen's work as a journalist forced him to become a quick-study on a multitude of topics, he's looking forward to gaining greater expertise in a specific field. "In the media largely you get to be a mile wide and an inch deep on a variety of issues, and that's great - it keeps you on your toes all day - but rarely do you get to sink your teeth into something that shows some great value," he said. "And what's more worthwhile than health care."

McElveen is a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps and served during Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm. In addition to working as a broadcast journalist in several markets, including Santa Barbara, Calif., and New Orleans, he worked for a marketing firm in Florida. Before that he picked up some marketing and media skills from his dad, who worked in radio as a "jingle gypsy" producing commercials. "Remember the ads with the jingles, 'Coke is it' and all that stuff? I grew up in the atmosphere of him fashioning position statements, slogans," McElveen said. "He would ask me about it from time to time. I always had an interest in it and joined the service to pay for school. I had an eye toward broadcasting always, but sports broadcasting."

McElveen never pursued that path, however. His first news director sold him on trying out a news job.

"He liked my voice because it was at a radio station. That kind of got me in the door," McElveen said. "That was when I realized I would much rather spend my time when I'm not working watching sports and focusing on something that is a little more than entertainment."

Industry uncertainty

The morning we spoke, the Washington Post published a story with the headline: "This is how Obamacare might actually explode," which painted a picture of what could happen to the Affordable Care Act if the Trump Administration and Congress "keep insurers guessing over whether it will continue federal payments that lower deductibles and copays for millions of Americans." If insurers are guessing, what's that mean for consumers? "The future is really uncertain, and that's leading to a lot of trepidation and nervousness in the industry. We can

only play the cards that we're dealt," McElveen said. "But again it comes back to empowering the patient. ... Whatever model the government comes up with to replace the Affordable Care Act, Dartmouth-Hitchcock's core mission is to make the population healthier and understand the powers that they have in taking care of themselves and being proactive."

We can expect McElveen's core mission will be ensuring more of them choose his new employer.

"Dartmouth-Hitchcock is a world-class facility. They have all the talent in the world. They're in New Hampshire, and I put them on par with any hospital in this region," he said. "People need to be aware of what's available, and that they don't have to head south to get world-class health care. It's right here in their backyard. And the parking's better."