

## Redefining leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic: an interview with John Yip, CEO of Kensington Health

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John Yip

**J**ohn Yip, a highly respected leader in ophthalmology and community health, is the CEO of Kensington Health in Toronto, Canada. He accrued his reputation as a leader in previous roles as the Vice-President of Corporate Services for Health Quality Ontario, a managing consultant for GCI, the IT and business consulting services giant, a senior consultant at PricewaterhouseCoopers Consulting, and a consultant at KPMG. John has made significant strides in health,

reducing cataract surgery operating room turnover times from 30 minutes down to a mere seven which is integral when such a procedure has a waitlist of over a year amidst a rapidly aging population. His experiences, insights, and achievements are profoundly influential, not just for other current and future CEOs in healthcare but also for any front-line worker who is willing and dedicated to making an impact during this unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic. There is much to learn from John in terms of leading a revolution to transform and innovate within our healthcare system for the better.

**PN:** Why do you think health systems innovation and transformation is so important during these times?

**JY:** Innovation and transformation are really just buzz-words that people use to look at cost-containment in the current environment of ballooning deficits. The system is complicated by inefficiencies, tax-payer funds, and a highly political environment. One of the simplest ways to enact change is to get the media involved and that is what happened during COVID.

It takes a good crisis to move people, structural barriers, and innovation forward. I am not going to diminish the tragedy that is unfolding; lives have been lost and that damage is irreparable. This crisis has revealed our vulnerabilities, not just in health care, but also human elements including our cravings for social interaction. In the former, we saw how fragmented our system was with the inability to deal with a global pandemic.

Three examples are as follows: (1) Virtual care adoption has skyrocketed; trying to launch this pre-COVID was like pulling teeth; (2) LTC [Long-Term Care] homes are finally getting much-needed attention, funding, and advocacy. The public now understands the importance of LTC

and the negative impact a lack of support can have on our patients and families; and (3) The intersectoral nature of our system is improving where LTC homes, hospitals, and primary care are more interconnected than ever and where relationships have deepened significantly.

I would not call these ‘innovations.’ They are not very innovative, and we have been speaking about them for decades. This pandemic forced us to enact the change we needed 20 years ago because we had no choice. I think that our focus on innovation and transformation are misnomers as they force us to think too far out of the box when the answers are clearly in front of us. Rather than thinking of new ways to solve problems, let’s focus on improving quality of care by looking to other sectors, observing what works best for them, and piloting some of those ideas in health. Post-pandemic, we will have a better system. That is my hope.

**PN:** If you had to hire a person to take your place at Kensington Health, what qualities would you look for in this leader to improve the quality of care at your organization?

**JY:** Leadership does not need a title. Rather, it is about doing what is best for your organization. We have overlooked a lot of people who help in delivering bedside care. Everyone at Kensington is a front-line hero in some way. I royally screwed up on the simplest tasks while on the floor during COVID and a dietician called me out for possibly contaminating the food. It does not matter if I am the CEO or a residential aid; if I make a mistake that can impact the patients negatively, I should be called out on it. Leave no stone unturned. Erin had the grit and the ‘balls’ to tell off the CEO and that is commendable.

If I had to make the decision for our next hire, I would look for courage, integrity, and selflessness. Leaders need to understand the movement of the current and swim upstream when needed despite it being difficult. They also need to be true to themselves; it will garner trust. If you mean what you say and act on it, you will build strong relationships and those around you will help you in your endeavors. If you are trustworthy, you will have each other’s backs; when one says, ‘let’s dance,’ you will both dance. Finally, it is not about you. Treat others the way you want to be treated and you will get everyone to dance with you. Hopefully, this will lead to influencing someone else with your idea so that someone says it like it is their own and gets credit for it because that is when you realize that you really made an impact.

Whether you are a physician, cleaner, or nurse, there will be competing priorities for your time, clinically, financially, and personally. We are the privileged 1%, but do not forget your role in the system. Remember, you are here to put the patient first because that is a person just like you, an entity that is a part of your community.

**PN:** Who or what in your life do you look to for guidance when you have hit a rough patch?

**JY:** The whole experience during COVID was very cathartic and I had held my emotions all in. My board chair pointed out that I was burning out and I did not realize it. I could not sleep, gained a lot of weight, ate unhealthily. I unfortunately had to bag deceased bodies in transparent bags with a Sharpie to mark their names; I could not get that image out of my head. Twenty-four hours prior, I was feeding them.

I turn to mindfulness and introspection. My mornings start early with a run to see the sun and clear my mind. I also bike to work to be alone, reflect, and keep my stress on the road so that I am calm when I get to work or back home. This has helped me to obtain clarity on who I am and who I am not which helps me to better structure my actions to get to where I want.

COVID or not, dealing with stress is tough so find that outlet to release. Set goals; my new one is to run every street in the city of Toronto, and I am 6% there. I've seen so much that I have not seen before from communities, historical houses, and artwork that have changed my perspective on our diverse city. There is a theme here. I

did not have to go far to explore; I was just in our backyard. Same thing goes for innovation. In short, balancing your work and personal life is imperative but reflecting will guide you to new heights. Just remember not to get ahead of yourself either; be proud of who you are but remember that you always have room to improve.

**PN:** What is one piece of advice you would give to yourself looking back to pre-COVID times?

**JY:** Stay the course. Hold the mind. Believe in yourself. It will be uncomfortable, and you will want to break and deviate from what you have to do. Bring people along for support and stick with it. Ultimately, it will always get better despite how small or foggy the light at the end of the tunnel is. When the self-doubt comes in when I am biking a longer route or in a triathlon, I talk to myself in third person and walk myself through one step at a time, "John, you can do it. John, bike to the next street, don't stop. Bike to the next, don't stop." We got through the first COVID wave and I know we are ready for the second. This sounds cliché but there are so many times I wanted to give up; I would have regretted it. Pain is temporary; glory and the success of saving lives is forever.

**PN:** Any final words?

**JY:** In short, this is a conversation greater than leadership. There are things you cannot predict will happen. How you react to those events is what will shape who you are; they are what got me to where I am today.