

EXECUTIVE INSIGHTS: UNIVERSITY HEALTH

Jimmy Holmes: Hello. I'm Jimmy Holmes, market president and publisher of the San Antonio Business Journal. Welcome back to Executive Insights. A healthy workforce is essential to a strong business community, and digestive health plays a large role in that equation. That made me realize that from preventative screenings to advanced minimally invasive procedures, access to high-quality gastroenterology care impacts productivity, long-term health outcomes, and overall quality of life across San Antonio and South Texas. Joining me today is Dr. Sandeep Patel, Director of Gastroenterology at University Health. We'll discuss how his team is expanding access to advanced digestive care and building a program designed to meet the growing needs of our region. Dr. Patel, thank you so much for being here.

Dr. Patel: Thanks for having me, Jimmy.

Jimmy Holmes: All right. Well, let's get started. University Health describes gastroenterology as a treatment of digestive conditions. We're going to talk more about the most advanced treatments for these conditions and how your team has developed this program. But first, we would like to acknowledge that March is Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month, and the disease is getting some special attention because there's an increased rate of death among younger patients. This is alarming.

Dr. Patel: Yes, Jimmy. It's really alarming. This excitement comes from data published in the Journal of the American Medical Association in the fall of 2025. What it showed was that after a fairly steady trend of the incidents of colorectal cancer over decades, the incidence has steeply risen as of 2019, particularly in the age groups of the 45- to 49-year-olds. We don't really know why this is happening, but there are some theories, and we feel there are probably a few contributing factors, predominantly environmental, dietary and lifestyle factors. I think leading a sedentary lifestyle, diet, eating ... The American diet is a diet that is made up of eating high volumes of ultra-processed foods, red meat, a diet that's low in fiber. Gut microbiome gets a lot of press. With the wide use of broad-spectrum antibiotics, which wipe out our normal gut flora, compensatory gut flora, that leads to problems, the ingestion of microplastics.

We do feel like genetics does play a role, although it's estimated that only about 15% of people with colorectal cancer actually have a hereditary component. Those are the factors that we think are playing a role in why folks are getting colorectal cancer at an early age.

Jimmy Holmes: Because of the increase in cases, you have joined with one of your patients, Bexar County Commissioner Rebecca Clay-Flores to urge screenings for those who may be at risk. Who should get screened for colorectal cancer, and what screenings and treatments does University Health offer?

Dr. Patel: The current CDC guidelines state that all individuals should get some form of colon cancer screening at the age of 45. Now, unless you have a familial or genetic predisposition,



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Dr. Sandeep Patel is a gastroenterologist and advanced therapeutic endoscopist specializing in the treatment of complex gastrointestinal conditions using minimally invasive techniques. His interest in medicine was shaped by personal experience, including his grandfather's battle with pancreatic cancer, and early clinical exposure that fostered a passion for patient care and problem-solving. Patel focuses on advanced endoscopic procedures to diagnose and treat challenging GI disorders while emphasizing clear communication and individualized care. He has been recognized as a Texas Monthly Top Doctor for multiple years. Patel also serves as medical director and co-founder of Rebecca's Wish Foundation, which supports awareness and research for pediatric pancreatitis.

then you may need to get screened even earlier than that. Colonoscopy is a screening tool of choice, and this can be arranged by one's primary care provider. These are usually performed by a gastroenterologist, but there are alternative forms of screening. Your PCP can arrange for testing of the stool, looking for either blood or DNA changes, known as the Cologuard test.

Jimmy Holmes: Okay. In addition to colorectal diseases, your gastroenterology team treats numerous digestive conditions. That covers a lot of territory: everything from your throat to your stomach, pancreas, gallbladder, liver, and intestines. What are some of the most prevalent diseases or problems your team sees?

Dr. Patel: Yeah, it's a lot of square footage to cover, for sure. By far, we see a significant amount of liver, gallbladder, bile duct, and pancreatic disease in South Texas—much more than in other parts of the country—including inflammatory conditions, stone disease, and cancers of the hepatopancreaticobiliary system.

Jimmy Holmes: Your website mentions an emphasis on minimally invasive procedures, including a nonsurgical weight-loss procedure.

I'm guessing a lot of people would like to know about that. How would you compare it to the immensely popular GLP-1 medications, which thousands are now taking to lose weight?

Dr. Patel: Yeah. Our endobariatric program, which we recently established, is just one example of an advanced endoscopy maneuver, which if I may take a step back and talk a little bit about advanced endoscopy, which is a subspecialty within the field of gastroenterology that really is aimed at finding non-surgical solutions to complex digestive disease problems, and weight loss, obesity is just one example of it. Let me give you an example of what endobariatrics is. We use an endoscopic suturing device within the stomach that allows us to shrink the stomach or decrease the volume of one stomach, and it's comparable to a surgical sleeve gastropasty. Again, one of the advantages of endoscopic maneuvers versus a surgical maneuver is: number one, cost; number two, recovery time; and number three, complications. It's just another example of what we've done over the past 20 years in terms of looking for endoscopic solutions to what used to be surgical problems.

Jimmy Holmes: Well, thank you for that. As I came in, I noticed numerous curtained patient bays, diagnostic labs and rooms for patient screenings. You said it's the state-of-the-art program that's grown tremendously in the past few years, with plans to expand even further. Explain what your team has built so far and your vision for where this gastroenterology program is headed.

Dr. Patel: The vision was to build a great program that brought state-of-the-art technologies to this environment, so that people of Bexar County did not have to leave San Antonio. Now, with what we've created here, we've been able to attract talented individuals who are passionate about serving the community in collaboration with University Health, which has provided us with a state-of-the-art endoscopy lab. After traveling throughout the country, looking at different labs, I'm proud to say that we created a very special place that we call the Advanced Diagnostic Center here at University Hospital that houses this entire program. In many cases, patients don't have to leave San Antonio to get state-of-the-art care. They don't have to leave to go to cities like New York City, Chicago, or Los Angeles. And in some cases, they actually get better care in San Antonio. There are a few programs that we are the world leaders on.

Jimmy Holmes: Wow. Which programs?

Dr. Patel: We are the world leaders in pediatric endoscopy. We created the very first advanced endoscopy program for pediatricians about eight years ago, teaching pediatricians how to perform advanced endoscopy. We have eight graduates who are now all over the country at major children's hospitals creating programs similar to what they saw here. We did that program in partnership with the Children's Hospital of San Antonio.

Jimmy Holmes: Where do you see it going

from here? You've already built a very well-established state-of-the-art program.

Dr. Patel: Growth, that's what I see. It's fantastic to team with University Health as it expands its reach, providing primary care offices throughout the region and building two brand-new hospitals—Palo Alto Community Hospital on the South Side and Retama Community Hospital on the northeast side of the county. As we grow in facilities, it gives us the opportunity to grow in technology and continue to attract talented individuals to the community.

Jimmy Holmes: Dr. Patel, you traveled extensively to find the best in class and to bring it here and to grow your department in your program. Tell me, what did you see? What did you look for? What was the biggest thing you brought here?

Dr. Patel: The development of our lab was 15 years in the making. As an invited guest speaker, fortunate enough to travel all over the world, I had the opportunity to see GI labs in China, Shanghai, Beijing, India, South America, and all over the United States. And so, we took notes, and we would tabulate the best of the best throughout the world. To University Health's credit, when it was time to build the lab, they allowed us to be involved in the design process of the lab. I'm very proud to say that I truly believe we have one of the finest, most state-of-the-art endoscopy labs in the country.

Jimmy Holmes: We talked about your growth plans. How does that affect personnel in your staffing?

Dr. Patel: In 2024, we were tasked to create a gastroenterology department that would serve Bexar County with the expansions as the new hospitals we spoke of. We started with two. We're up to six, and the goal is to have about 20 providers that will then serve the new hospitals. We've been tasked to grow with it in the form of talented manpower and technology. Remember, we talked earlier that it's education and accessibility. We want to be able to provide state-of-the-art care to all patients in Bexar County, regardless of where you live in the county.

Jimmy Holmes: Fantastic.

Dr. Patel: Thank you.

Jimmy Holmes: Well, I really appreciate your time today. With that, Dr. Patel, thank you so much for sharing your insights. The continued investment in advanced digestive care is strengthening health outcomes and supporting the vitality of our business community across San Antonio and South Texas. This was Dr. Sandeep Patel with University Health. I'm Jimmy Holmes, and thank you for joining us.

