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News

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For Immediate Release

Joseph A. Dearani Elected President of The Society of Thoracic Surgeons *Mayo Clinic surgeon will focus on clinical outcomes registry and helping secure the future of cardiothoracic surgery*

NEW ORLEANS (January 27, 2020) – Cardiothoracic surgeon Joseph A. Dearani, MD, from the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN, today was elected President of The Society of Thoracic Surgeons during the organization’s 56th Annual Meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana.

“Being elected as the STS President is the highest honor of my career and means everything to me,” said Dr. Dearani, chair of the Department of Cardiovascular Surgery and Professor of Surgery at Mayo Clinic. “I look forward to making a difference and working with colleagues at the Society and other volunteer leaders to address some of the challenges in cardiothoracic surgery. My commitment is to the whole specialty, and I will do my best to get in the trenches in all three areas—adult cardiac, congenital heart, and general thoracic surgery—and give attention to their issues and needs.”

Dr. Dearani’s inspiration to pursue a career in medicine was driven largely by his father—an “old school, genuine” family physician who often treated his patients by making house calls. The decision to specialize in cardiothoracic surgery, though, was a little less straightforward. In fact, surgery wasn’t even one of his initial interests. Instead, Dr. Dearani considered emergency medicine and primary care. It was when he rotated onto cardiac surgery toward the end of medical school and spent a day with esteemed surgeon Robert Bruce Wallace, MD, that he decided, “I’m going to be just like him.”

During his training, Dr. Dearani crisscrossed the country. After completing his undergraduate education at Fordham University in New York City, he earned his medical degree from Georgetown University School of Medicine in Washington, DC, and participated in a surgical research fellowship at Harvard Medical School and Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston. He then completed residencies in general surgery at Georgetown University Medical Center and thoracic and cardiovascular surgery at the Mayo Clinic before matriculating in a congenital cardiac surgery fellowship at Loma Linda University in California. Afterward, he returned to the Mayo Clinic, where he’s been practicing ever since.

“Cardiothoracic surgery is a specialty that’s constantly innovating and evolving. It’s a specialty that has a unique interface with technology. It’s a specialty that combines important qualities such as intellect, critical thinking skills, judgment, technical abilities, and perseverance—it’s never over until it’s over, and you never give up,” said Dr. Dearani. “I love this about the specialty. Cardiothoracic surgery captures all of these ingredients, which I think are essential to being a great doctor and a great surgeon.”

With interests and expertise in pediatric and adult congenital heart surgery, as well as robotic heart surgery, Dr. Dearani has authored or co-authored more than 550 peer-reviewed journal articles, abstracts, and book chapters. In addition, he has participated in hundreds of presentations on these topics.

Also throughout his career, Dr. Dearani has been deeply involved with various humanitarian outreach activities in Asia and South America, having made more than 20 trips to those continents over the past 2 decades. In addition, he served as medical director of Children's HeartLink for 20 years, leading efforts to train medical teams and work with government officials in low- and middle-income countries, providing education, and transforming health care in underserved parts of the world.

"When you participate in humanitarian activities, you see what the challenges are, while also brainstorming ways to make things better with much fewer resources," said Dr. Dearani. "Your goal is to achieve a sustainable model in a hospital that has the ability to grow, resulting in the greatest impact for the greatest number of people in that underserved area. This experience teaches you a lot of creative ways to work with teams of people in less-than-ideal circumstances. There are many lessons learned that you bring back home. It makes you a better surgeon. It makes you a better doctor. It makes you a better person."

Dr. Dearani said he's also learned other important lessons from his patients at Mayo, making for some of the most meaningful and proudest moments of his career. Not too long ago, he operated on Lola, a young patient who had an especially upbeat and enthusiastic spirit. Following her surgery, she wrote a book titled "Beautiful Scars" and expertly presented it to a standing ovation at an American Heart Association Go Red for Women event. She also tirelessly advocated for "Lola's Law" in Puerto Rico, which requires mandatory echocardiography screening for abnormal pulse oximetry in newborns, and used her "Make-a-Wish" gift to discuss with then-First Lady Michelle Obama increasing awareness of and support for children with congenital heart disease.

"These shared experiences and moments with patients reset the bar of why we're doing what we're doing," explained Dr. Dearani. "The ability to participate in the care of someone who has that kind of a future in front of him or her to be a productive and contributing member of society is why I love this specialty."

An STS member since 1997, Dr. Dearani has served on numerous Society leadership bodies; most recently he was First Vice President. Dr. Dearani also chaired the Workforce on Congenital Heart Surgery and the Workforce on Surgical Treatment of Adults with Congenital Heart Disease. In addition, he has held prominent leadership positions in other cardiothoracic surgery organizations, including the American Board of Thoracic Surgery and the Congenital Heart Surgeons' Society.

As STS President, Dr. Dearani said that one of his priorities will be the continued evolution of the world renowned STS National Database and refinement of its voluntary public reporting program. Also important to his agenda is expanding diversity in cardiothoracic surgery, especially in relation to women. "We have more women going into the specialty, and cardiothoracic surgery will be better for it," he explained. "Women bring a different perspective. They bring a different viewpoint, temperament, and tone to patient care and administrative meetings, helping make the specialty of cardiothoracic surgery better for the patients of tomorrow."

Few career paths require such relentless tests of resolve and commitment as the path to becoming a cardiothoracic surgeon. It's no secret that this specialty is "high-stress, high-risk, and high-reward," according to Dr. Dearani, reaffirming the importance of conducting regular self-assessment checks and maintaining good balance between one's personal and professional lives. He has chosen music as the offset to his life as a surgeon. Dr. Dearani plays the tenor saxophone in two bands, performing live several times a year, and has recorded a few albums. Every morning before work, he practices for an hour in the "4:30 Room," a soundproof music studio in his home.

"Whether it's sports, music, or another hobby, you should think critically about what it is that you do in your off time and how it could potentially improve your life as a surgeon or in your profession," said Dr. Dearani.

Dr. Dearani and his wife Ann, who is a nurse, have three adult children—a son who is a financial analyst, a daughter who is an interior designer focusing on health care and wellness facilities, and another son who is enrolled in business school.

"We tell our children the same thing I tell young surgeons," said Dr. Dearani. "Find your purpose and passion in life. Do what you love to do, and you'll be great at it. There is always room at the top."

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Founded in 1964, The Society of Thoracic Surgeons is a not-for-profit organization representing more than 7,500 cardiothoracic surgeons, researchers, and allied health care professionals worldwide who are dedicated to ensuring the best possible outcomes for surgeries of the heart, lung, and esophagus, as well as other surgical procedures within the chest. The Society's mission is to enhance the ability of cardiothoracic surgeons to provide the highest quality patient care through education, research, and advocacy.