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## EXIT INTERVIEW

## AFTER NEARLY 40 YEARS, HOUSTON HEALTH CARE LEADER HANGS UP HIS STETHOSCOPE

BY DEBORAH BLUMBERG | SPECIAL TO THE HOUSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

After nearly 40 years as a physician, and then chairman of the board and managing director at Kelsey-Seybold Clinic, Dr. Spencer Berthelsen retired March 10. Berthelsen championed an accountable care model of health care – where health providers form networks to provide high-quality and efficient patient care – long before the term existed. His dedication to patients has been a driving factor behind every improvement and investment at the clinic, which serves nearly 400,000 patients at 20 clinics in the Houston area.

“The accountable care movement is transforming American



medicine,” said Berthelsen, the first in his family to become a physician. As much as 30 percent of health care dollars spent in the U.S. go toward unnecessary care, according to the Institute of Medicine. “We’ve eliminated that 30 percent,” he said.

Berthelsen said he’s retiring at an exciting time in medicine, when advances in science and technology have expanded the ways medicine can help. “The business side may be a bit more challenging, but it’s never been a better time to enter the practice of medicine.”

#### Why did you go into health care?

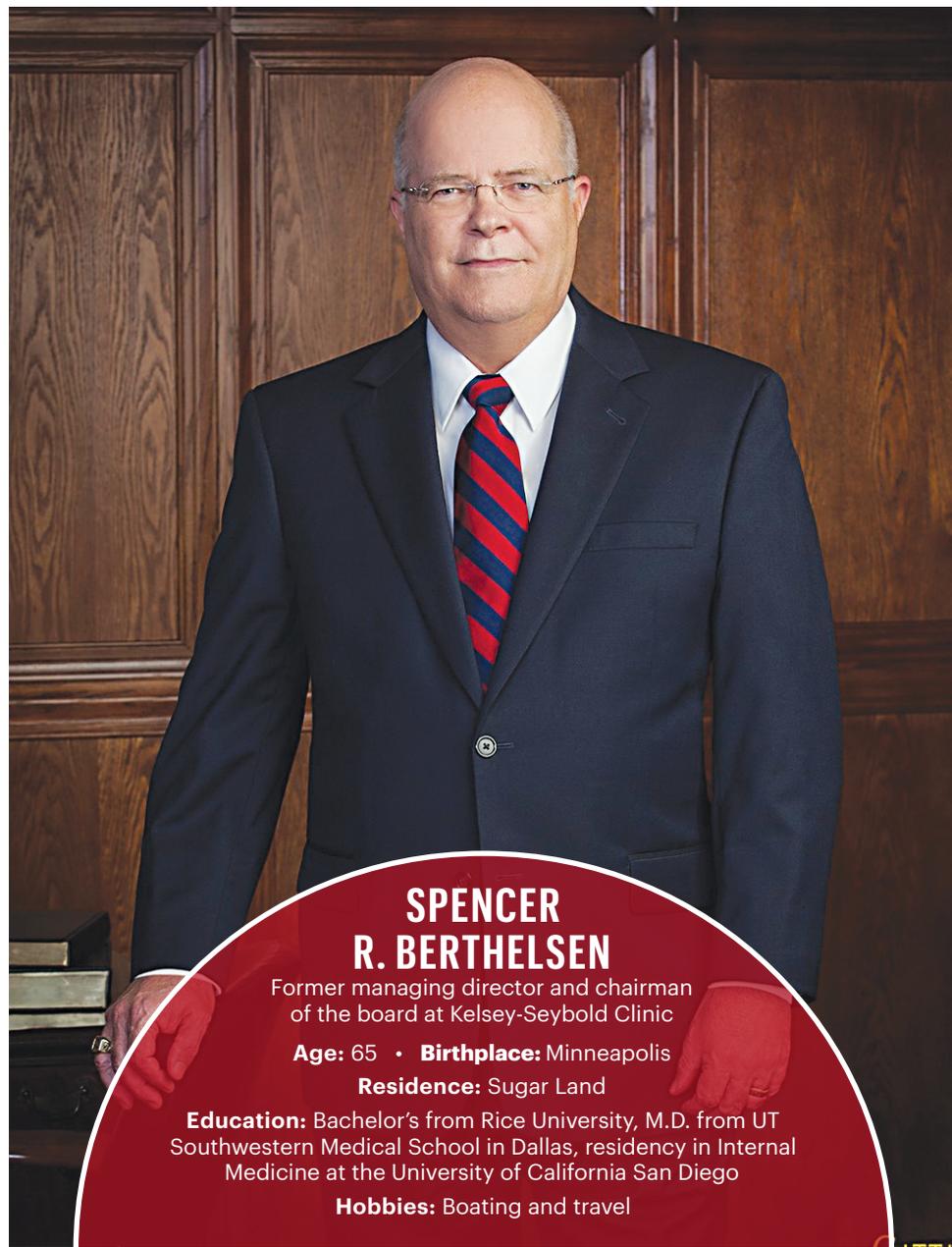
In college, I thought I wanted to be an engineer. My father was an independent business man, and I thought it would be attractive to work for myself, so my plan was to become an engineer and work in a small office on a consulting basis. I knew I was good in science and math and wanted to parlay that into a career. At that time, though, in the early '70s, I could tell the field was depressed. So, I decided to find an alternate pathway. Medicine was a field where I could use my math and science skills.

#### What was your biggest accomplishment in your 37 years at Kelsey-Seybold?

The most important thing that’s happened at Kelsey-Seybold while I was chairman was being the first in the country to be accredited as an accountable care organization in 2012. To qualify, you have to have a number of elements in place – quality of care and service, but also reduced costs. We believe banding together in a system of care will help remove unnecessary costs and resolve the issue of affordability of health care in the U.S.

**What was the biggest challenge you had to overcome in your career?** It’s one thing to have a model that raises value in terms of quality and cost, but it’s another to be accepted by customers. That’s been a challenge. It’s taking time for our model of care to be fully embraced by employer groups, but we’re seeing greater uptake now than we’ve ever seen before.

**What are your thoughts on integrative medicine, an approach growing in popularity in which doctors take into account the whole person, including lifestyle factors such as diet, exercise**



### SPENCER R. BERTHELSEN

Former managing director and chairman of the board at Kelsey-Seybold Clinic

**Age:** 65 • **Birthplace:** Minneapolis

**Residence:** Sugar Land

**Education:** Bachelor’s from Rice University, M.D. from UT Southwestern Medical School in Dallas, residency in Internal Medicine at the University of California San Diego

**Hobbies:** Boating and travel

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**and stress?** Integrative medicine is an important part of taking care of patients. Environmental circumstances can sometimes aggravate a person’s condition. Diabetes is the perfect example; it can be affected by the

amount of exercise you get, how you maintain your ideal body weight and the food you eat. Relying as much as we can on a healthy lifestyle will minimize the amount of medical intervention needed.

#### When did you know it was time to retire?

At Kelsey-Seybold, we have term limits for my role. I was term limited last year in April. In preparation for this, the board identified my successor four years ago.

#### Who is succeeding you and how did Kelsey-Seybold come to pick him?

My successor, Dr. Tony Lin, has been with the clinic for several decades and is widely respected as a leader at Kelsey-Seybold. He picked up the chairman role last spring, and will become managing director. We’ve had a gradual process of introducing him to all aspects of leading the clinic.

#### After 40 years at Kelsey-Seybold, what do you think is your legacy?

Helping to foster a steadfast commitment to increasing the value of services we provide and our ability to reduce cost. Looking back at the nine largest employers we had over the last two years, on a membership-weighted basis, we reduced the cost of care by 17 percent on average, and for some it was up to 35 percent.

**If you could go back in time to tell yourself something 37 years ago, what would you say?** Entering medicine is definitely a noble and worthy profession.

**What’s on the horizon for you?** I’ll have a limited role with Kelsey-Seybold as a special adviser to the board. When people ask me what I’m going to do now that I’m retired, I say I’m going to live my life with imagination, which is a fancy way of saying, “I’ll make it up when I get there.”

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*