



a critical mission

Dr. Richard Rahija leads the Animal Resources Center at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital

By Joe Montgomery

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Dr. Richard Rahija oversees 100 employees with a budget of \$7.5 million at the Animal Resources Center, a 163,000-square-foot facility at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tenn.

Vision and values make up a big part of the driving force behind Dr. Richard Rahija, who

graduated with his DVM from K-State in 1974. A love of science has also been instrumental in leading him into his current career as the director of the Animal Resources Center and Associate Member of the Department of Pathology at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tenn.

"I have spent the majority of my professional life in biomedical research and I consider my job a gift," Dr. Rahija said. "I believe that I have a personal and professional responsibility for the care and welfare of the laboratory animals that are used in biomedical research. There are many institutions where biomedical research is conducted, but few with a mission like St. Jude, where the importance of quality animal care and how well we deliver it in support of the research programs is so readily apparent to the lives of patients."

St. Jude was opened in 1962 by late entertainer Danny Thomas and has become internationally recognized for its pioneering research and treatment of children with cancer and other catastrophic diseases. Research has played a pivotal role in pushing overall U.S. pediatric cancer survival rates from 20 to 80 percent.

"I know there's a direct connection between the outcomes of our research and the care of the children in our clinic," Dr. Rahija said. "When you talk to employees, they will tell you that we have a unique mission and you see it every single day. You're here for one reason and the mission of finding cures and saving children is well-defined and ever-present."

Transition from private practice

Dr. Rahija didn't start out his veterinary career to be a researcher or administrator.

"When I was in veterinary school, I imagined going into private practice and living happily ever after," Dr. Rahija said. "After the first year in private practice, I realized that I needed to consider other career options. I would spend hours at the clinic working up cases because I enjoyed it, but there was something unfulfilling about the routine of private practice and the quality of medicine that clients can afford that motivated me to make a change. I came back to K-State one weekend and ran into Dr. Sam Kruckenberg [the CVM's first director of the Animal Resources Facility]. He told me he had contacts with companies doing drug development, which led me to joining Pitman-Moore."

After a few years as a clinical research veterinarian,

Dr. Rahija became a senior scientist and experimental surgeon for Ethicon Inc., where he developed medical devices such as surgical staplers and instruments and devices for microsurgery. In order to move forward as a career scientist, Dr. Rahija decided to pursue a Ph.D. in experimental pathology at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. He also co-trained in the university's Division of Animal Laboratory Medicine. His training in laboratory animal medicine at UNC-CH prepared him to obtain board certification in the American College of Laboratory Animal Medicine.

"UNC-CH is where I learned laboratory animal medicine," Dr. Rahija said. "In private industry, I did this type of work by default because I was the only veterinarian with clinical experience. Most companies don't have the breadth of an academic laboratory animal medicine program where you work with many different species in biomedical research."

After finishing his Ph.D., Dr. Rahija remained in North Carolina, but at a different university. In 1987, he accepted the position of deputy director of Duke University's Division of Laboratory Animal Resources which supported the research programs of 400 investigators. He was promoted to director in 1993 and remained with Duke for 15 years overall.

A job too good to pass up

Although Dr. Rahija enjoyed his career at Duke, the opportunities at St. Jude were too attractive to pass up.

"The facility at St. Jude was brand new, and I was attracted to running one large facility rather than multiple small facilities spread out

all over a university campus," Dr. Rahija said. "The philosophy of the hospital and the caliber of science really appealed to me as well. I just fell in love with the culture of the hospital. It's critically important to what we do here. It

doesn't matter whether you're in a private or a public academic institution — it's challenging to get funding. The improvements that make a program strong, I can implement here because we have the resources and commitment to have world-class research."

Now, that Dr. Rahija works in an administrative role, he shares his values and beliefs that shape his approach to running a highly respected research program.

"I believe in persistence and striving for excellence," Dr. Rahija said. "Mediocrity is not

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an option, and it will impede the path to discoveries and cures. I also believe I must continue to learn not only about laboratory animal science and medicine, but must stay abreast of the new discoveries in medical science. Technology is changing our lives and we must make an effort to keep up."

Additionally, Dr. Rahija truly enjoys the challenges in his position beyond the role of scientific research.

"I come to work every day energized," Dr. Rahija said. "I confront operational issues every day that have the potential to affect our research. Some days I work with mechanical engineers on the maintenance of equipment and the operation of our mechanical systems in the facility. Other days I'm working with the environmental health and safety staff managing potential hazards in the workplace. I wear a lot of different hats."

Sound advice

As for young veterinary students who are weighing different career options, Dr. Rahija offers sound advice.

"Look at all of the options," Dr. Rahija said. "I got a sound foundation in clinical medicine during the years that I spent in private practice that was essential to my career in research. Going to K-State provided me with a broad knowledge base, and I am indebted to the university for the quality of the education I received. It is up to you to find what you like to do and to commit yourself to doing it. Take risks, be prepared for change, and welcome it!" 

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