

Next mission

Ob/gyn leader eager to advance UI strengths

By Dawn Goodlove

Kimberly Leslie, MD, was as fascinated with space exploration as the rest of the country when television's *Star Trek* debuted in the 1960s, so naturally she became a fan. But having the future birthplace of the sci-fi show's Capt. Kirk just down the road in Riverside isn't what drew her to The University of Iowa.

It was the opportunity to advance exploration of a different kind—in biomedical research—that brought her to the UI as professor and head of obstetrics and gynecology. She succeeds Jennifer Niebyl, MD, only the fourth woman nationally to head an ob/gyn department when she arrived at the UI in 1988. Niebyl remains as professor and director of the department's residency program, and she continues her clinical activities.

"Ob/gyn is a great department that has been directed by a person who has been a role model for me and many women for years," Leslie said.

Most recently Leslie was ob/gyn professor and chief of obstetrics, as well as director of maternal-fetal medicine, at the University of New Mexico in her hometown of Albuquerque. A clinical obstetrician, she learned to love research during a maternal-fetal medicine fellowship at Georgetown University.

"Practicing medicine is not terribly creative, because you really want to deliver a standard of care. But in the research lab you can let your mind wander," she said. "I was steered to a lab at the National Institutes of Health, where I volunteered just to learn about molecular biology, the new revolution in science in the early '80s."

She studied hormone receptors at the NIH. When she started her own laboratory at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, her team developed expertise in measuring receptors in tissues. She is principal investigator for a core laboratory in steroid hormone receptors funded by the Gynecologic Oncology Group.

MD: University of Texas Southwestern Medical School.

Family: Husband Jeff Dunkelberg, gastroenterologist and hepatologist, UI Hospitals and Clinics; daughter Lauren, an eighth-grader.

Fun fact: Leslie has engaged in equestrian competitions since childhood. At age 11, she and her horse, The Hammer, jumped 6 feet 2 ½ inches, then a record in New Mexico.



Kimberly Leslie, MD

Leslie's primary research interest is endometrial cancer. Iowa's incidence of the disease is higher than the national average: about 480 Iowans will be diagnosed this year.

"The number of patients seen at Holden Comprehensive Cancer Center at the UI will allow us to run single-institutional clinical trials to test new drugs against molecular targets we've identified in preclinical studies. There is a whole new palette of drugs that block certain pathways important to tumor growth, so we have the opportunity to put some of these drugs to use against endometrial cancer," she said.

She wants to secure a Specialized Program of Research Excellence (SPORE) grant for endometrial cancer research from the National Cancer Institute. Holden Cancer Center currently partners with Mayo Clinic on a lymphoma SPORE grant.

Leslie intends to add urogynecology and reproductive health to the mix of existing ob/gyn fellowships (gynecologic oncology, maternal-fetal medicine, reproductive endocrinology and fertility). "Very few institutions have even the three major subspecialties covered, so that tells you the stature of our institution already," she said.

In clinical care, she sees the UI Women's Health Center becoming the hub of interdisciplinary services for women, including surgery, radiology, psychiatry, and orthopaedics, for example.

"Whether they're 13 or 65, our patients could walk into a familiar place and access the excellent services throughout the institution. Women really like to be familiar with the doctor and with the system. It's important to engage women because they also make decisions for their children and their parents," she said.