

PRINT-National leader in pediatric surgery urges human-centered innovation in health care

As the nation's health care system grapples with inequities, violence, and social challenges that extend far beyond hospital walls, one national leader in pediatric surgery says the key to progress might not be new technology — but renewed humanity.

Dr. Edward M. Barksdale Jr., professor of surgery and pediatrics at the University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine and chief surgical officer for the Chicagoland Children's Health Alliance, delivered the keynote address for the [Pearl Lecture Series](#) at the Jump Trading Simulation & Education Center in Peoria. His talk, *"Beyond the Walls: The Unseen Power of Simulation for Social Innovation,"* explored how medical simulation can drive not only clinical excellence, but also social transformation.

Dr. Barksdale was also named this week as one of the [four icons of the American College of surgeons](#).

Often clinicians get so infatuated with fancy medical devices or new innovations such as AI, Dr. Barksdale says, they miss the importance of human connection. He says medical simulation, which uses specially trained actors with real life experiences to simulate health care situations, is where health practitioners "can rehearse for humanity."

"How can it help us be more human? How can it help us be more compassionate and empathic. So much of the work I do in Cleveland where I was, and now in Chicago is to look at how we can take technology to allow physicians to lead more with their hearts than their heads."

Barksdale, who trained as a surgeon more than four decades ago, reflected on how simulation has evolved from a technical training tool into a platform for team-based learning, system improvement, and now, human-centered design. Human-centered design involves understanding users through empathy, brainstorming ideas, and iteratively prototyping and testing solutions to create products, services, and systems that are useful, desirable, and effective.

The Jump Center in Peoria, Dr. Barksdale points out, is a national leader in advancing simulation from skill-building to innovation. He says the best simulations involve diverse participants from the community being served and that's what he's seeing at the Jump Center.

"What an environment like this offers is that child, that adult to say, 'Dr. Barksdale the way you speak to me or the words that you use are not things that I understand. Can you break that down, can you give me a tangible example?'"

Barksdale said one of the most important frontiers for simulation is applying innovation to social determinants of health such as food insecurity and homelessness, and considering trauma-based care, inequity, and violence.

Dr. Barksdale has worked on nationally recognized programs that have led to less gun violence in Cleveland.

The keynote speech also honored Dr. Richard Pearl, a longtime pediatric surgeon and leader at OSF HealthCare Children's Hospital of Illinois and the University of Illinois College of Medicine Peoria.

Pearl, Barksdale says, was both a friend of 35 years and a visionary in creating a simulation-based culture of learning and compassion.

“There are things that people envision when they come to a place that have a life and legacy long after they leave and the work that he did to establish this incredible center is phenomenal.”

Barksdale hopes his message will inspire health professionals and community leaders alike to see simulation as a tool not just for perfecting technique, but for strengthening civic engagement and empathy.