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Healthcare Achievement Awards 2017

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Individuals and businesses honored in our fifth annual Healthcare Achievement Awards have worked to make care more accessible in central Ohio.

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Executive of the Year: John Johnson, MD, President and CEO, Access Ohio.



As a psychiatrist who treats patients with addictions and mental illness, John Johnson sees the potential that lies ahead for people, not their current condition.

He looks at business the same way, too.

More than a decade ago, Johnson saw few others in his field willing to accept some of the patients who were in the most dire need of their help: people who not only were ill but also were battling substance abuse, enduring homelessness and battling other problems. Medicaid reimbursement was poor, and their mere presence in a practice sometimes disturbed other patients.

"You want to send them out to the community, and no one would take them. ... This crowd doesn't fit in well with the general milieu of a clinic," he says.

"Somebody said, 'If you are that keen, maybe you should do something about it.' So I said, 'OK. I'm a very pragmatic person.' I said, 'Why would I leave that to the other people to solve it? Maybe I should do something about it.'"

Since Johnson opened his first Access Ohio Mental Health Center of Excellence in 2006, he has expanded to five locations in Columbus and Dayton. The centers provide diagnostic and treatment services exclusively for patients on Medicaid.

In 2011, he opened Access Hospital Dayton, a 110-bed psychiatric hospital on the site of the former Twin Valley Behavioral Healthcare facility in Dayton. The Ohio Department of Mental Health & Addiction Services had closed the hospital as a cost-savings measure in 2008.

His businesses employ 33 psychiatrists and more than 400 total staff, and they generate more than \$20 million annually. He estimates they have treated about 30,000 people.

Johnson, who was born and educated in India, came to the United States in 1993 after working in his native country, England and Ireland.

"When I came to the US, I realized unlike Europe or at that time in India, this is a place where healthcare needs to be run like a business," he says. He quickly began working on an MBA at Ohio University while running a private practice and serving as a staff psychiatrist for Six County Inc., a private, not-for-profit mental health services provider based in Zanesville.

Not that his business was successful from the start. "For the first few years I lost money, but I knew I was building something for the long term," he says. Look for more growth from Access Ohio in the coming months. Johnson says he's negotiating the purchase of two more practices.

Johnson is treating people who used to fall through the cracks of the healthcare system and social services network. People with chronic mental illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder die 20 years earlier than the rest of the population, he says. That's because they're more likely to be homeless, more likely dealing with addiction, more likely to smoke, and more likely to suffer from other conditions such as obesity and high blood pressure.

In the population he serves, "It is very hard for somebody to remember... to take their medication three times a day without forgetting for a month or a year. They need much more support," Johnson says. "There are a lot of barriers, things that we take for granted."

And there are bureaucratic barriers as well. In central Ohio, Johnson has been part of a partnership that runs the Community Shelter Board's Navigator Program, which gets people into permanent housing and surrounds them with the support they need to stay off the streets. Its key is connecting clients with one caseworker—a navigator—who works with the client from the moment he or she enters a shelter and stays in contact even after the person's life has stabilized.

The program, supported by the city of Columbus and Franklin County, was part of a system redesign three years ago, says Community Shelter Board Executive Director Michelle Heritage.

"They took on a new program with all that entails," Heritage says. "I really appreciate the desire to innovate and the desire to hang in there."

Johnson says that's part of his philosophy.

"When everybody sees challenges, I see the potential," he says. "When people discourage me ... I see a little further around the curve."