

What's Your Moonshot? Podcast Series

Featuring John Nickens, President and CEO, Phoenix Children's

[00:00:00] Narrator: Welcome to A&M Healthcare Industry Group's What's Your Moonshot podcast series where leaders seek to solve big problems and transform healthcare. Join us for conversations to hear how their vision and bold moonshots are becoming reality.

[00:00:41] Narrator: Welcome to A&M's moonshot podcast. I'm Chris Smedley, managing director with the health industry group. I'm joined with Charles Hankins, M.D., senior adviser, and John Nickens, the president and CEO of Phoenix Children's.

[00:01:06] Chris Smedley: We worked together in the past. I'm so excited to spend time with you and see how your careers have grown, what you've done. It's really impressive. I admire your work.

[00:01:15] John Nickens: Thank you.

[00:01:16] Chris Smedley: It's great to be back. So today we're going to talk a little bit about your moonshot, which I understand it is really a big aim focused on transforming the children's environment and market particularly in Phoenix where you are now. Really with the aim of improving the health of children today and in the future.

[00:01:38] Chris Smedley: While preserving what's really unique about the children's market, which we'll talk a little bit today, which is very special. So I would love to hear a little bit more about that.

[00:01:46] John Nickens: Well, thanks Chris and thank you both for having me here. The idea is simple. Let's improve the health of a generation. And so when you say that it sounds a little aspirational, kind of squishy. What's the metric that goes with that? But pause for a moment.

[00:02:02] John Nickens: We're not going to be casual. We're going to be very purposeful. How do you improve the health of a generation? First, do you believe that? If you believe, which I'm going to speak for Phoenix Children's, but I think I echo the voice of many CEOs in children's hospitals across the country, is we aspire to be transformational and improve the health of a generation.

[00:02:24] John Nickens: And if you really believe that, then that means 10, 15 years from now, a child will grow up and have a shot at a brighter, healthier future as an adult.

[00:02:44] John Nickens: Now, the journey from here to there, it's complex, it's difficult, it's a challenge, but our clinicians and children's hospitals raise their hand every day and do hard things. And so, with the privilege to lead our group, I want us to set our sights on improving the health of a generation.

[00:03:00] John Nickens: And then when it cascades down into what does that mean for you personally, that's part of the fun of being transformational. How are you today going to improve the health of a generation? And so I'm thrilled to have the conversation with you guys today.

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[00:03:12] John Nickens: That would be my moonshot. That is looking big and saying we change our overall perspective. We're very purposeful and we zero in on improving the health of that's the lens we look at the future with.

[00:03:29] Charles Hankins, M.D.: Amazing. Thank you, John. I know that you spent most of your career in children's healthcare and that's admirable and we love you for that but you did have a chance to go experience the adult side too and I know a lot of the things are same but I know some things are different and I know you're back in children's healthcare and very happy about that.

[00:03:51] Charles Hankins, M.D.: Can you tell us how your previous experience in children's healthcare prepared you for this, but also what is it uniquely different that got you excited about getting back fully invested in children's healthcare?

[00:04:03] John Nickens: Yeah, what a fun journey through the adult side. So, at one point I was president of LCMC Health Hospitals. So, six adult hospitals in Manning Family Children's plus we were running the children's hospital in Baton Rouge.

[00:04:26] John Nickens: And what my entire career had been focused on pediatrics and children's hospitals and what I learned very quickly is that in the adult world there are pieces of the business side that are very mature that maybe in the children's side we haven't experienced the whole concept of DRGs and even being punished if you don't hit your DRG number where you get a reduction in revenue was a bit foreign.

[00:04:48] John Nickens: We had touched on it a bit in children's hospitals, but man, it drives the day-to-day operations in the adult world that I really enjoyed. It made me a stronger, better hospital administrator.

[00:04:56] John Nickens: I think what drew me back to children's hospitals is just the moment walking through the hospital engaging people who go through all of their training and choose pediatric healthcare are wired a little different.

[00:05:12] John Nickens: They think much more transformational rather than transactional. And I missed that heart, that mission side. And for us, it's hope and healing. Being the best in healthcare, serving the patient and the family.

[00:05:27] John Nickens: That's our mission at Phoenix Children's. And so, hope and healing for a child and their family. And that's a part. It's a struggle in children's hospitals, but you touch the whole family. In the adult world, sometimes it's one-on-one with that patient, but in the children's hospital, you're engaging with the entire family.

[00:05:50] John Nickens: So, that maybe it was more of a heart thing. I really enjoyed the intellectual part of the adult world, but I wanted to get back and finish my career somewhere that I felt like I could be transformational.

[00:06:00] Chris Smedley: And I love your comment. There are things that are very much the same. We like to kind of separate ourselves and say, well, kids are not just little adults. You know, they need special care, but the way you run an OR is pretty

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much the same. An adult in pediatrics, the way you run an ER in many ways can be the same.

[00:06:25] Chris Smedley: There's some subtleties there that you have to be aware of, but I think challenging ourselves in the children's hospital world and the way we function, we can learn from some models in adult.

[00:06:39] Chris Smedley: John, you had an interesting start really in the front lines in your career that has really transcended to where you are today and it's quite a trajectory. When you think about that path of what got you where you are today and even many of the leaders that you worked with in some of your prior roles that have gone on to do some really amazing things as well. You're in some elite company I would say in the children's world.

[00:06:56] Chris Smedley: What have you learned along the way and how does that prepare you to really successfully drive this moonshot of yours which is focused on this idea of generational health?

[00:07:12] Chris Smedley: And I hear a lot of heart in what you say in terms of how you lead. What's the sort of special sauce that you learned along the way or what makes you and your role as president and CEO that you're taking to Phoenix Children's that you've learned from so many others and your experiences?

[00:07:22] John Nickens: Well, wow. You're going a level deeper and most people just assume since you're the CEO, it's been this direct path. You went to school, got your masters, got all the educational components, you got experience, now you're the CEO.

[00:07:38] John Nickens: For me, I fell in love, got married very young, had kids. By the time I was 22, I had three kids, and my first job that you're referencing was 3 to 11 registration clerk in the emergency room at Texas Children's.

[00:07:54] John Nickens: I like to look back and wow, I grew from there to where I am today through a whole bunch of people who helped me like you guys. You knew me back in the day at Texas Children's as I was growing my career and part of it at Baylor College of Medicine, but it's with me every day.

[00:08:08] John Nickens: You know that guy, that 22-year-old back in the ER, he was snarky. He was a little sassy. He had a whole bunch of opinions about the way the CEO was running the organization and he'd walk around and talk to Cheryl in the emergency room.

[00:08:32] John Nickens: And I think back to that guy and every time I make a decision, every time I'm looking at policy, I remember he doesn't know me maybe. And so what are the optics? What message am I sending by the actions I'm taking, my behavior, the policies, the decision, the people I hire, the people that are no longer at the organization, everything, who we partner with.

[00:08:47] John Nickens: And so it has definitely influenced who I am as a leader. I always pause and I think back, you know, living paycheck to paycheck and trying to

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figure out, can I just get a dollar an hour raise, what's that guy thinking when I make this decision, how will it impact him?

[00:09:10] John Nickens: So, it's influenced me and now I think improve the health of a generation. You know, I wanted that maybe that maybe the guy at 22 couldn't even think in those terms, but I can. So it's my responsibility to ensure his kids have a brighter, healthier future. And so it's in my own little personal inspiration, I guess.

[00:09:34] Charles Hankins, M.D.: John, to build on that a little bit or your thoughts, workforce in the future in pediatric healthcare, children's healthcare is really important and we're and you would be competing for that same workforce talent as every other healthcare system does.

[00:09:41] Charles Hankins, M.D.: Not just in the respiratory therapists and the nurses and the registration clerks but also in the up and coming medical students and what specialty they're going to do and what physician role do they want to play in the future. How do you see your role in developing the workforce of the future for children's healthcare?

[00:10:06] John Nickens: I think this is the biggest question for us right now and it's true I'm sure in many industries but healthcare it's amplified. We should have learned something from COVID. Post-COVID. We should look back and see that during COVID there was an entire senior group of nurses that said, "I'm done. I'm out." And they just exited.

[00:10:21] John Nickens: And so when we go forward now, those nurses that were trained are five years into their training. What we have today is a generational conflict. We have boomers, we have Gen X, we have millennials, and we have Z all at the same time.

[00:10:46] John Nickens: The millennials are trying to step into leadership. The Gen Xers believe we have the leadership. They look at the world differently. When I walk around the organization, I'll make it very direct to Phoenix Children's, but almost 60% of our frontline staff are millennials. Nearly 80% of our leaders are Gen X.

[00:11:01] John Nickens: So, you can imagine those conversations. You know, Gen Xer is saying, "Hey, walk it out. You know, make work your favorite." Like work is in and of itself the value the process.

[00:11:16] John Nickens: And a millennial is saying, you know, I hear you. I like to work. What's our purpose? What are we trying to accomplish? What's the meaning? I'm not going to waste my time on something I don't believe in. The Xers don't even think that way. And then you have a Gen Z who's saying, "Yes, the work is important. Yes, let's have meaning and let's add some flexibility." like when do I want to work?

[00:11:34] John Nickens: Silly story. I'm talking to my daughter. I'm complaining about the generations and she says, "Dad, I don't know if you know I'm a gig." I said, "What are you talking about?" She's like, "Well, I have three different jobs. I'm in San Antonio." And so, she works at three different hospitals because they wanted to control her

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schedule, but instead what I do is I give each one of them, "Here's the days I'll work this month." We never even thought that way.

[00:11:58] John Nickens: I was like, "What are you talking about? You got to pick one employer and contribute. That's not our future. Guys like me have to adjust quickly to this generational shift. What I'm excited about is the millennials and Z, they see the world smaller. It's very personal. They're very connected.

[00:12:24] John Nickens: They're committed. They deliver. The millennials stepping into leadership, I think, is going to be one of the most exciting and strongest times of healthcare because they see the world with their heart and their mind. And so, I'm really excited. I think this is the best time to be in healthcare. But our biggest challenge is workforce.

[00:12:40] John Nickens: And sometimes I believe we're doing it to ourselves by our lens. Here's one other story. I'm rounding. I'm talking with the nurses. I said, "What's one thing that would just really put us over the top that you would stay? I don't have to worry about retention." And this nurse says, "If every day when I leave, you would just pay me via Venmo at the end of the day."

[00:13:09] John Nickens: Now, I can't even comprehend that. Some people in the Boomer and X don't even know what Venmo is. But imagine that. They want to work a shift and when the shift is over, boom, we drop the money into their account or we drop it into Venmo. I don't know. Why can't we do that? I mean, you put in the work. Why do you got to wait two weeks? Like, we need to challenge our way of thinking. What is it that you want?

[00:13:33] John Nickens: Because I don't want you going to that hospital. I want you to come to my hospital. And so, now you've got some leverage. What do you want? How am I attractive to you? Because when we're done and I'm going to be a good leader and figure out how to make them work, then together we're going to improve the health of a generation. But it requires me to be excellent in the day-to-day operations and the transactional to earn a ticket into the world of being transformational.

[00:13:54] John Nickens: So, I think workforce is a big one. I spent a lot of time thinking about it.

[00:14:03] Chris Smedley: John, I see in so much of the social media that you put out how much you're in the front lines and I think it has to have a little bit of an origin with how you got into healthcare and have ascended.

[00:14:14] Chris Smedley: As you think about transformation and with the goals that you have, there's a lot of hard work. There's a lot of change that's going to be needed. You've seen many other leaders navigate that and I'm sure there are things that you draw from for the employees and the community and the patients and the clinicians in Arizona.

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[00:14:25] Chris Smedley: How do you want them to experience that journey of transformation? What's really important to you in terms of getting to those goals? How it translates to the people that come into contact with you all?

[00:14:49] John Nickens: Great question. I would have said a few years ago, I would have focused in on operational excellence and our pedigree of physicians and clinical and I would have really focused on the day-to-day operations, who we are as an organization taking that journey together. But and I feel really confident in the way I was trained and many of the people I grew up with, we know how to handle the functions of healthcare.

[00:15:05] John Nickens: But when I got to Phoenix Children's, I said I was going to do a 100 days of listening. And so from October 1 to January 9th, and it was hard. I like action. And so I'd go out and I'd meet with the nurses and I'd come back and say, "Guys, like that's a good idea. We should go implement that right now." And they would the executives and physician leaders would say, "I thought you were going to discipline yourself till the end." And we would do all the changes at once.

[00:15:39] John Nickens: And so then I stopped trying to listen just to take notes and I just started listening. I just started connecting. And what I realized during that process is they already knew the answers and the solutions. I just had to create this connectivity.

[00:15:55] John Nickens: And with the community, I want to go on that journey together. I want to be out in the community. And when I say I, I mean Phoenix Children's, all of us. We want to be where kids are and we want them to be proud and comfortable with us in the hospital when they need us.

[00:16:12] Charles Hankins, M.D.: John, real quick, I'd like for you to expand that just a little bit. In my experience in the bedside setting, moms make a whole lot of decisions and dads are very important. I'm one. But the reality is that I think moms are there.

[00:16:29] Charles Hankins, M.D.: If you were talking to the moms in your area, how would you what would you want one message you'd want them to hear about children's healthcare and why it's so important for their families?

[00:16:49] John Nickens: Well, I'll do it is moms, I want you to know we are absolutely committed with everything we have to deliver excellent care to your child. And then we're going to think beyond just the holistic spiritual, emotional, mental, physical. We're here for you. We want to improve the health of a generation. It starts with how we treat you and your child when we have that interaction.

[00:17:10] Chris Smedley: John, thank you so much for for coming today. That was fun. It was awesome talking with us.

[00:17:14] Charles Hankins, M.D.: And this was right after Artemis 2 just landed. And so so your moonshot aligns very closely with what I heard during all that. So it was awesome. That was pretty cool to watch, wasn't it, Artemis?

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[00:17:31] John Nickens: Yeah, that's awesome. Thank you for having me. What a great job you guys are doing helping people tell the story.

[00:17:32] Narrator: Thank you. Alvarez and Marsal Leadership, action, results.

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