Behind the Scenes with David Hilden, MD, WCCO Radio Host Doctor

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Dr. David Hilden works as a hospitalist, which means he specializes in treating hospitalized patients





David Hilden, MD and author Susan Schaefer share a moment during their interview.

WCCO Radio's *Healthy Matter's* host, Dr. David Hilden, is first and foremost a medical professional of the highest order. It was my honor to spend time interviewing him at his HCMC executive office where in addition to still providing direct care he serves as Vice President of Medical Affairs for Hennepin Healthcare.

Appearing in Minnesota Good Age

Care [giver]

As a primary care doctor, radio host and now executive at one of the busiest hospitals in the state, Dr. David Hilden has a way of putting patients first.

A summons to a chief executive's office can spike momentary anxiety.

On a winter day in 2008, David Hilden, M.D., entered the office of Lynn Abrahamsen, then CEO of Hennepin County Medical Center (HCMC), the metro area's safety net hospital, not knowing what to expect.

"You're the voice of Hennepin now," Abrahamsen told a bemused Hilden. With that proclamation, HCMC took the bold step of pioneering an on-air promotional radio program on WCCO 830 AM. *Healthy Matters* debuted in 2009 on a one-year trial basis, and Hilden became its inaugural host.

"I had never been on radio in my life!" said Hilden, looking back on those times from his new office in HCMC's administrative wing.

Hilden, you see, is an executive now, too, having been selected this past June by his peers to become Vice President of Medical Affairs for Hennepin Healthcare (which includes HCMC and the new Clinic &

Specialty Center, both in downtown Minneapolis) plus a network of clinics and other divisions throughout Hennepin County.

"There is no place I would rather practice medicine than Hennepin and I am humbled to represent a medical staff of incredibly talented and committed colleagues," Hilden, 55, said when his appointment was formally announced. "I hope to follow previous physician leaders in fostering collegiality, purpose and, most of all, a collective sense of joy in our professional lives."



Radio daze

But let's get back to Hilden's radio career. It all began as a friendly challenge from two doctor pals.

"There I was, minding my own business as a primary care doctor," Hilden said. "At the time, an email was circulating, soliciting HCMC medical staff auditions for a new radio show that the hospital was considering."

Those friends, Dr. Heidi Coplin, now at Allina, and Dr. Anne Pereira, presently an assistant dean at the University of Minnesota Medical School, encouraged him to audition with a glib decree: "Since you never shut up, you would be good at it!"

Hilden's live show — *Healthy Matters*, now beginning its 12th year on air — proved them right.

A whopping 560 one-hour broadcasts later, *Healthy Matters* regularly tops the radio ratings in the Twin Cities. And it's moving to a new 7–8 a.m. Sunday-morning timeslot to build on the many listeners Hilden's reached over the years.

Half of *Healthy Matters* features Hilden answering questions from listeners on open phone lines, while the other half showcases guests discussing specific topics. All of the shows are live, on-air, with yearly live, in-person broadcasts from the Minnesota State Fair.

"I'm always amazed at how many people come to see me there,"
Hilden confessed, a smile animating his boyish face. Clearly enjoying
this aspect of his work, he also produces content for
myhealthymatters.org, an associated blog, and hosts short monthly
spots on local TV and radio stations as a health expert on topics in the

news.

Friends Pereira and Coplin retain bragging rights for their wise nomination of Hilden.

"From our early days working together as new physicians at HCMC, it was clear that David naturally and genuinely connects with people, making sense of medical issues that can be complicated and, at times, frightening," Coplin said.

"Of course," she said, "it doesn't hurt that he has the gift of gab."

Pereira agreed, citing the way Hilden loves to talk with and meet new people. That, combined with thoughtful care of patients and his enthusiasm for teaching, make Hilden the perfect health-related medical show host, Pereira said.

Finding medicine

There's no mistake that the man behind this media celebrity is first and foremost a practicing primary care physician and acute care hospitalist (more on that later) in one of the state's busiest hospitals. He also holds a faculty position at the University of Minnesota Medical School.

It's all pretty remarkable, especially when you realize medicine is actually his second profession.

Hilden graduated in 1987 with a bachelor's in electrical engineering from the University of Minnesota. And his first eight professional years were spent working in the forefront of the bar code industry.

Bar codes? Yes, bar codes — those ubiquitous black stripes affixed to every jar, can and clothing tag you've ever had scanned at your favorite Target, Cub or Best Buy.

Hilden entered the workforce as the operations manager at Minneapolis-based Symbology, then the nation's largest supplier of bar codes. In charge of computer networks, graphic designers and the film production facility, the recent graduate and newly married Hilden staked his claim in this emerging field.

But, over time, the work didn't prove that challenging. His wife, Julie, discerned Hilden wasn't living up to his potential, eventually asking why he wasn't practicing medicine.

"I thought that was an odd question," he said. "I hadn't really considered medicine as a career."

But he does recall mentioning an old desire to become a medical engineer in passing.

With Julie's notion percolating, Hilden began to consider a different future. He finally reasoned, "Why not?" and began in earnest to make the cut as a medical student.

For two years, Hilden transformed his kitchen table into a makeshift biology lab, where he spent endless days and nights performing experiments, eventually completing his medical school prerequisites. Not convinced he'd be accepted, he applied to only one school — his alma mater, the University of Minnesota — figuring if it didn't work out, he would just continue with bar codes.

But his efforts paid off, and in 1996 at the respectable age of 31, Hilden traded a world of skinny black bars for hospital blues, and he's never looked back.

Family first

Julie, his biggest advocate, remains the center of his universe. Around her true north rotates the "exceptionally tight" Hilden family.

A Minneapolis Public Schools social worker, Julie was "the older woman" Hilden fell for over 30 years ago while he was a young adult counselor for his church's youth group.

"I was 24 and she was 28," Hilden said, "and I was so smitten that I agreed to drive a rickety old school bus just to get in her good graces."

Realizing that he was more interested in Julie than in his young charges, Hilden proposed marriage.

Julie, who also works as a fitness and yoga instructor at various metro area YMCA locations, continues to inspire and amaze her spouse: "Sometimes I come home to find her standing on her head," Hilden said, lightheartedly adding that he can't muster a headstand, despite being head over heels about her.

Together they've raised two children. Their son Alex, 26, attended Oberlin College in Ohio and is following his mother's lead, currently serving as a special education assistant for Minneapolis Public Schools. Daughter Abby, 25, transferred from the University of Michigan to the University of Southern California, where she's pursuing an acting career.

Through frequent flyer miles, text messaging and family dinners, the parents communicate with and see their children regularly.

Their close family life was shaped by Hilden's own upbringing. His parents, Richard and Joan, were high school sweethearts, who — after graduating from the University of Wisconsin — married young.

"At the age of 84, they still have the strongest marriage I've ever seen," he said.

Born in Madison, the youngest of four and the only boy, Hilden moved with his family to Minneapolis when he was only 2.

"I'm a lifelong South Minneapolis guy," he said. "My childhood was defined by my small South Minneapolis world and the people around

What's a hospitalist?

While many medical doctors choose specialties over primary or acute care, Hilden selected the latter, eventually joining the ranks of the relatively new role of hospitalist, which became increasingly common in the 1990s.

To be a hospitalist is to specialize in inpatient medicine and to be responsible for managing the care of hospitalized patients in the same way that primary care physicians do for outpatients.

But it's more than a stand-in role. A hospitalist is in charge of minimizing the need for hospital visits to the patient by other physicians, but also to focus on the general medical care of all hospitalized patients through patient care, teaching, research and leadership.

Patients, Hilden said, would ideally have one doctor who deeply knows them, treats them and cares for them throughout life, whether at a clinic or hospital or in hospice care.

"In the old days, that's how it was," said Hilden, who is officially an acute care hospitalist. "But those days are gone."

It's not all negative, however. In the old days, a family doctor's hours were brutal. Most physicians today wouldn't accept them. The big positive about the role of the hospitalist, Hilden said, is that they're specialized in treating the whole patient — with specific knowledge about the varying conditions one faces in a hospital setting.

Bed sores, blood clots and infections are just some of the considerations in addition to the patient's presenting illnesses, Hilden said.

"Primary care is at the heart of what I do," Hilden said. "And I think it's the most important, and the most difficult, job in medicine."

One of Hilden's early mentors, Dr. David Williams, said Hilden exemplifies Francis Weld Peabody's quote: "The secret of the care of the patient is in caring for the patient."

Williams said: "David really cares for the patients he sees, and moreover, very early in his career he understood that the health of any individual had to be viewed in a community context."

That worldview prompted Hilden to pursue additional academic work resulting in a master's degree in Public Health. This is especially relevant to his practice in a safety net hospital where "the social determinants of disease" are of paramount importance in determining health outcomes.

Hilden has appeared in Washington, D.C., many times as a public

health policy advocate. Through his role as the Minnesota Chapter Governor of the American College of Physicians (ACP), he puts the rubber to the road, lobbying to make health care equitable for all.

Hilden is also a member of ACP's Health and Public Policy Committee, which is the primary policy-making committee for the nation's largest specialty physician organization.

He was the ACP's 2017 Minnesota Chapter Laureate Award recipient, and in 2014 took home the Volunteerism and Community Service Award. In 2010, he was awarded the Physician Communicator of the Year Award by the Minnesota Medical Association.

Aging and universal health care

Treating older adults with the respect that their experience and wisdom deserve is central to Hilden's health-care philosophy.

"We need to treat people as individuals and not provide different levels of care just because they are older," he said, stressing the importance of giving honest medical information to older adults — not providing false hope for treatments that aren't likely to benefit them.

On the other hand, he cautions that just because a patient is older, caregivers should never withhold treatment that would be beneficial.

Breaking into a wide grin again, Hilden spoke tenderly about seniors' well-developed sense of humor. He often turns the tables on them, noting how much they appreciate wit.

"Sometimes, I have to make sure I get to their health problems during our appointments because I treasure long and engaged conversations about stories of their youth, family, careers and future dreams," he said. "I think doctors need to *always*, *always*, *always* refrain from patronizing older adults. Many seniors defer to their doctors, but almost all still want an intelligent conversation."

Hilden regularly talks about end-of-life issues with seniors.

"I am convinced that nobody is shocked to know that they will someday die — and this is certainly no surprise to people in their 80s and 90s," Hilden said. "So, I have a supportive and informative conversation with seniors so that they know what to expect and how we can together go about ensuring that their later years are the best they can be, and when the time comes, that they will indeed have a 'good death."

On music and life

In spite of his jam-packed professional life, Hilden carves out time for essential physical and intellectual pursuits.

He's an avid runner — and reader, recently finishing the biography of Ulysses S. Grant by Ron Chernow, author of *Alexander Hamilton*, one of his favorites.

On his nightstand now is *Black Leopard*, *Red Wolf* by Minnesotan Marlon James, whose *A Brief History of Seven Killings* was challenging at first, but one Hilden became obsessed with eventually.

No big secret to those who know Hilden well is his absolute reverence for Bruce Springsteen, whose autobiography *Born to Run* tops his list.

"A Boss concert is a near-religious experience," he said.

Hilden's wish for the world, however, goes beyond a good night of music or even his health-care advocacy and treatment of patients: "My wish is that we had more love and more justice in the world — that we treat all people as our brothers and sisters all over the planet."

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Hear Dave!

David Hilden's Healthy Matters radio show has a new timeslot: 7–8 a.m. Sunday mornings on WCCO Radio 830 AM.

Hear past shows at wccoradio.com. Topics include sleep, influenza,

food and nutrition, end-of-life care and shoulder replacement surgery. Visit **myhealthymatters.org** for more information.

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Reactions



















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