In the fall of 2007, Frederick C. Morin III, M.D., became the College of Medicine’s 17th dean. Since then, the College has built an impressive new structure in the heart of its campus, and faced some of the toughest economic challenges in decades. Vermont Medicine sat down with Dean Morin in November to talk about the state of the College, and what lies ahead.
We've upped both the diversity and the quality of the class simultaneously... That's a real credit to the education here.

I have lunch with different groups of students each month, and I know there's a good deal of interest among them about our planned simulation laboratory, including a core facility and some planned satellites which we're working on cooperatively with Fletcher Allen and with the College of Nursing and Health Sciences. We've raised over $3.5 million for the center so far, and we've begun ordering the gear already with anticipation of completing it in the next year or so. That's partly why I'm so glad we've hired Bill Jeffries as our new senior associate dean for education. Bill's an accomplished educator and scientist, who has experience developing a "sim center" and also developing clinical campuses.

VM: As the relationship with Maine Medical Center ends in 2011, how is the progress on building new clinical partnerships?

RM: We've now built a well-appointed common space for grad students, which is slightly less than what we have at Maine today. So we'll be both giving our students more diverse choices, which is a big asset for our students. Down the road, there could be the opportunity to recruit students from there as well. We've also have a signed agreement with Eastern Maine Medical Center in Bangor. Alongwith, I think we'll have maybe four-dozen students at any given time at all of these sites, which is slightly less than what we have at Maine today. So we'll be both giving our students more diverse choices, and we'll be training more students in Vermont than ever before. I think it's a positive situation for everyone involved.

VM: What about graduate students?

RM: Over the last six years we've implemented a whole new curriculum for the medical students. Now we want to look at improving the program for graduate students too. Usually, in their last three or four years, grad students are in laboratories with their faculty mentors, but for the first couple of years they're more on their own, taking classes. We've now built a well-appointed common space for grad students to gather and study, which we hope will encourage a stronger sense of community and collaboration. We should be announcing our first director of graduate student education soon, and we've raised grad student stipends so we can compete for the best students based on how good our science is, not just on salary.

VM: Research is another important mission of the College. Any surprises or challenges you've seen in this area?

RM: The key positive in research at the College is the strength of our faculty. We have incredibly strong investigators here. The standards they reach, their grant funding, and their rate of publication are exceedingly high. From 2007 to 2009 they have increased our federal grant funding by $14 million. And that's before the federal stimulus package [the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act] kicked in, so that really is "swimming upstream." Although the amount of federal funding was shrinking, we were getting more of it. And just since July, in stimulus package money we've received about $14.5 million to add to the total. The faculty here put in well over a hundred ARRA grants in just a few months. They took advantage of the opportunity, and have done exceedingly well. The chief question to be: what will happen after the ARRA money goes through the NIH and the federal finance agencies? Will we sustain this "bump" or will our funding drop back down to where it was before? That's the biggest risk out there, and that's not something we can control. We'll have to see where that heads, but I think that our folks have done a fantastic job of getting the funding that's been available.

One of the reasons I focus on success in research funding is that, in a very tangible way, is the external world's view of excellence. To distribute that funding, the NIH and NSF get the world's experts in your field together. To get those awards from his professional society, so when we talk about translating research, he's really done both sides of it. I'm very pleased Ira's joined us in this position.

Dean Morin speaking to students at one of his monthly informal lunches

RM: Yes, we're broadly represented in six of the eight working groups. There are three areas, the Biological Sciences, Neuroscience, and Public Health and Health Policy, where we are the biggest component in terms of current ongoing research, and we have a lot to offer the University in developing the other "spires."

The point of the "spires" is to concentrate the University's resources on areas where we can be in the top tier nationally. There are some areas where I believe we are there now. The biological sciences since is clearly the best-developed research grouping at UVM, with outstanding investigators from the College. We have really strong neuroscience work here, for instance, in neurobiology and in neurology. We have very good behavioral work in the College's Department of Psychiatry, in the Department of Psychology, over in Arts and Sciences, and in the College of Nursing and Health Sciences. Put that together and it makes a serious research strength. We're a big part of these efforts, and I think the faculty here largely want that to happen. They want to build on our strengths.

Our new senior associate dean for research, Dr. Ira Bernstein, will help us develop research. He's won both basic science and clinical research awards from his professional society, so when we talk about translating research, he's really done both sides of it. I'm very pleased Ira's joined us in this position.
Our focus, so we’re recruiting a new chief of hematology/oncology, and we’re going to be recruiting a research director to pursue a Center for Biomedical Research Excellence (COBRE) grant in cancer. What we need most is more funded investigators, and COBRE grants provide support to develop these faculty. We think this is a very realistic goal over the next three years.

VM: What else has surprised you about the College?

RM: I realized on my very first visit the cohesiveness of the University, Fletcher Allen, College of Medicine, and the state government. I didn’t appreciate as fully the cohesiveness of the faculty and the student body. We are a relatively small medical school and the students really do bond together. They really like being here and they like each other, and that feeling continues for decades after they graduate. In fact, we have some of the most attached alumni in the world. We have twice the national average of the portion of our alumni who give philanthropically to the College every year. We’re in the very top two or three positions. The community feeling of folks who have been educated and trained here is incredibly tight. This last year, Tom Sullivan, one of our alumni, has been extremely generous in his philanthropy to the College of Medicine. And it’s a natural outgrowth of his strong attachment to his medical alma mater.

VM: How do you like living in Vermont?

RM: I really like it. That was part of the attraction for me in the first place. I love the outdoors. Hiking, biking, skiing, sailing, fishing — these are the kinds of things that I love to do. And Vermont is a Mecca for those activities. I’ve hiked pretty much every trail up Mansfield or up Camel’s Hump. And skied down many of them. And I’ve skied everything at Stowe dozens of times.

VM: And you’re a serious birder?

RM: Yes, I like to work, and I’ve hiked from here to Canada, with friends. I’ve been out trout fishing in the streams with my wife, Tracy. The place we’ve loved most is up near Waitsville, it’s the north branch of the Lamoille, and it’s just gorgeous. In about a ten-mile stretch there are several covered bridges, beautiful villages, and crystal-clear water; a classic New England stream with big boulders, several covered bridges, beautiful villages, and crystal-clear water; a classic New England stream with big boulders, several covered bridges, beautiful villages, and crystal-clear water; a classic New England stream with big boulders, several covered bridges, beautiful villages, and crystal-clear water; a classic New England stream with big boulders, several covered bridges, beautiful villages, and crystal-clear water; a classic New England stream with big boulders, several covered bridges, beautiful villages, and crystal-clear water. And it’s a natural outgrowth of his strong attachment to his medical alma mater.

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VM: You’re UVM parents, also?

RM: Yes, we are. Our youngest, Mark, is a sophomore, and it’s great to be able to have him near enough to come home for dinners or holidays when he wants to.