



# UCSF Department of Medicine ZUCKERBERG SAN FRANCISCO GENERAL

## Reinforcing the UCSF-ZSFG Partnership in Challenging Times



Jeff Critchfield MD, ZSFG Vice Dean, Laurae Pearson, ZSFG Associate Dean of Finance and Administration receiving ZSFG Executive Award, and Susan Ehrlich, MD ZSFG CEO

*Since 1873, UCSF and ZSFG have collaborated in caring for San Francisco’s most vulnerable patients. Today, more than 1,500 UCSF faculty and staff work at ZSFG, and more than 1,000 trainees rotate through ZSFG each year. Besides providing care to one in nine San Franciscans and educating the next generation of leaders, ZSFG-based investigators lead nearly \$230 million in grant-funded research to develop better treatments, cure illness, and improve health care systems. This issue features four colleagues in the Vice Dean’s Office at ZSFG who are helping guide the next frontier of the exceptional partnership between UCSF and ZSFG.*

### Dr. Jeffrey Critchfield Better Together

Jeffrey Critchfield, MD, loves swimming in San Francisco Bay. “Some days you swim with the tide and fly along like Michael Phelps, then turn around and swim against the tide,” said Dr. Critchfield, Vice Dean of the UCSF School of Medicine at ZSFG since 2025.



Jeffrey Critchfield, MD

“I feel both exhilaration and humility.”

He experiences a similar buoyancy in leading UCSF at ZSFG. Dr. Critchfield’s role builds on relationships he’s cultivated over nearly four decades at UCSF as a medical student, internal medicine resident and chief resident, rheumatology fellow and postdoc, and as a ZSFG faculty member over the past 25 years. He has served as Director of the ZSFG Inpatient Medical Service, Vice Chief of Medicine at ZSFG, and Chief of the Medical Staff at ZSFG, where he forged close relationships across medical disciplines.

Dr. Critchfield was also founding Chief of the ZSFG Division of Hospital Medicine, Chief Experience Officer, and Medical Director of Risk Management at ZSFG. “Our team approached adverse events as learning opportunities,” he said. “We weren’t interested in punishing people, but instead identifying how we might learn and grow, and consider where else we have these same vulnerabilities. We developed skills in bringing people together in difficult moments.

At the heart is his partnership with ZSFG’s CEO, Susan Ehrlich, MD, MPP. “The most important element is preserving and uplifting the 152-year partnership between the City and UCSF,” said Dr. Critchfield. “Like all meaningful relationships, each comes together for a greater whole.”

One of his main responsibilities is leading



renegotiation of the affiliation agreement, the contract governing that relationship between UCSF and the City and County of San Francisco (CCSF). “It’s the largest single contract the City has with any external entity,” said Dr. Critchfield. “Last time it took 10 years to negotiate, and it hasn’t been touched since 1994.” Rather than feel daunted by the enormous task, he embraces it. “We have an opportunity to set the tone for the next 25 or 30 years of who we are: generous, thoughtful, open, precise, and clear,” he said. “It’s an incredible opening, and I wanted to be part of it.”

One priority is updating UCSF’s data sharing and governance agreements with the CCSF, ensuring that UCSF researchers have access to clinical data and can use emerging technologies like AI to translate this data into new knowledge that will help vulnerable populations.

In an era of scarce funds at the Federal, state and local levels, Dr. Critchfield also wants to explore how to develop new revenue sources.

He also wants to create a sustainable work environment. “The infrastructure of the General works, but much of it depends on the heroic activities of our employees,” said Dr. Critchfield. “We did that during COVID, and in some ways it’s become the new baseline. We want to return to work models that support staff in doing their best, most meaningful work.”

Dr. Critchfield takes inspiration from UCSF and ZSFG’s storied history together. “The 1980s was a dark time, where if you had HIV you were going to die,” he said. “Yet extraordinarily generous and creative things happened. Together we wrote papers and made breakthroughs... What heartens me is being surrounded by creative, collaborative people. Things that have been immutable are now in play. Even though there’s tremendous uncertainty, I have deep trust that I’m in the right place with the right people, caring about the right things.”

Besides swimming, Dr. Critchfield loves spending time at his Sebastopol home, tending his orchard and garden, and turning those fruits and vegetables into beautiful meals.

**Laurae Pearson  
Working Together to Find ‘Yes’**

Laurae Pearson started her California career as employee number 50 at Cisco Systems. Cisco’s founders, both Stanford professors, brought academic culture to their company. “I loved the freedom everybody had to contribute to intellectual work, and realized I wanted to be in an academic environment,” said Ms. Pearson.



Laurae Pearson

That motivated her to keep faxing her resume to UCSF until she was hired in 1994. Ms. Pearson spent the next 30 years in various leadership positions at ZSFG, including Director of Administration and Finance for the ZSFG Department of Medicine.

Now as Associate Dean for Administration and Finance at ZSFG, she serves as a translator between ZSFG and UCSF. “My role is aligning these two complex, massive institutions and helping them to find ‘yes,’” said Ms. Pearson. “Each partner has its distinct set of rules and priorities. How do we balance the academic and clinical ambitiousness of UCSF with the limited resources of ZSFG as a safety net hospital? Every day, I problem-solve. The most important thing is listening to what each partner needs, understanding the barriers, and being patient.”

Her main focus is helping negotiate the affiliation agreement. It was last updated in the era when Ms. Pearson was faxing

her resume to UCSF. “In 1994 we didn’t have a World Wide Web or electronic medical records,” she said. “In today’s world, everything is about data and metrics, whether it’s patient data, finances, space usage, or research. UCSF can’t easily access clinical data in Epic, because it belongs to SFDPH. We’re trying to navigate a broader, more flexible data-sharing agreement that will enable HIPAA-protected patient data to be used in appropriate ways to support patient safety, research, and quality improvement.”

As part of those efforts, she and her team hope to create visually friendly dashboards. “In a few years when someone asks a finance question, we hope to press a button and provide reports on where we were and where we are in the moment, rather than requiring a bunch of paper gathering and number counting,” said Ms. Pearson. “When the City says, ‘What is the affiliation agreement providing?’ we’ll be able to provide much more detail about how many patients we are seeing, what our providers are doing, and how we’re improving patient care.”

In this financially challenging environment where the City and County of San Francisco is facing a significant budget deficit, Ms. Pearson’s team is also working to find new revenue sources for continued and enhanced patient care. Beyond ZSFG, she also serves as Co-Chair of the UCSF Committee on the Status of Women, and helps lead other campus-wide initiatives.





**Vice-Dean's Office at ZSFG**

ZSFG Vice Dean's Office: 1st row, left to right: Laurae Pearson, Carmen Coffey, Eunice Woo, Barbara Haller (Lab Medicine). 2nd row, left to right: Alma Yates, Carmen Eshagh, Candice Corder, Stephanie Ma, Esther Chen, Andrea Sun, Eunice Santiago. 3rd row, left to right: Pierre Andrada, Andy Yeh, Raymond Cheung, Starr Knight, Jeff Critchfield, Howard Chen, Dan Sotto, Jackie Vespignani, Atesemhe Braimah, Juanita Villanueva, Fraser Conrad, Chi Prijoles, Ron Campbell, Jim Luie, and Roger Mohamed.

"ZSFG is a wonderful, collaborative place that is brimming with compassionate, intellectual, dedicated people," said Ms. Pearson. "It's such an honor to work at the General. ZSFG is really my home."

Outside of work, Ms. Pearson enjoys watching movies and spending time outdoors. A devoted fan of the Grateful Dead, she loves attending live music events with her husband, including jam bands, jazz, funk, classical, and opera.

**Candice Corder  
Telling the Story Through Data**

"People often think finance is boring, but my passion is translating complex data to help folks understand the landscape," said Candice Corder, MBA, Director of Finance for the Vice Dean's Office at ZSFG.



Candice Corder, MBA

She brings more than 25 years of experience, including working in financial services and technology companies before joining the

UCSF School of Medicine Dean's Office in 2007 as a database administrator. Ms. Corder then served in several leadership roles related to clinical funds flow from UCSF Health to the School of Medicine, including a decade as Director of Business Operations and Analytics for the UCSF Faculty Practice Organization. "I built a team that leveraged data and analytics to process that huge amount of money," she said.

Last year Ms. Corder joined the Vice Dean at ZSFG's Office, helping manage financial aspects of the \$300 million affiliation agreement between the School of Medicine and ZSFG. "On a day-to-day basis, it's managing invoicing and collecting funds, but on an annual basis, it's about negotiating [with CCSF]," she said.

In this financially challenging environment, one goal is demonstrating the value that UCSF faculty provide to ZSFG – not all of which is measured by billable services. "Folks at ZSFG are working really hard, and given my data-driven background, I want to show that in a more transparent way," said Ms. Corder.

For example, UCSF faculty lead many activities that contribute to excellent

patient care but do not generate revenue or have an assigned billing code. These include coordinating care to reduce preventable readmissions to the hospital, and participating in quality initiatives that improve patient outcomes, care, and experience. Ms. Corder enjoys using curiosity and creativity to demonstrate the value of these important, yet harder-to-measure activities. "You can't move what you can't see, and so I want to show these data stories in consistent, accurate, and reliable ways," she said.

Ms. Corder also focuses on identifying opportunities to bill for services that UCSF faculty are already performing. For example, wound irrigation generates a bill if it's performed by a surgeon, but often goes unbilled if it happens in the Emergency Department. This may be partly because the hectic environment makes it difficult to complete billing-related documentation. "We don't want to make people work harder or ask them to spend more time charting," she said. "But are there Epic workflows that could capture those types of procedures?"

These missed opportunities emerge anecdotally, but Ms. Corder is leading efforts to identify them in a more systematic way. "Can we count the number of patient visits, compare that to what's billed out, and identify how many are 'no charge' visits?" she asked. "Can we somehow convert them to chargeable? People are very innovative in budget meetings, and they're coming with all kinds of ideas of how to increase revenue. I'm looking for partnership with everyone, because challenging times are the perfect opportunity to share creative ideas and work together."

As UCSF prepares to renegotiate the affiliation agreement with CCSF, Ms. Corder contributes recommendations as part of the financial work group. She hopes the updated agreement will clarify data sharing policies between UCSF and CCSF, including electronic health record and accounting data. "Combining hospital data

and professional fee [billing] data together would give us a better picture of our overall financial health, and where we can move levers to be more efficient and bring better value,” she said.

Ms. Corder appreciates the opportunity to work at ZSFG in the Vice Dean’s Office. “It’s a joy to be here, and I feel incredibly lucky and inspired to work with people who have such kindness, integrity, and humor,” she said. Outside of work, she enjoys mountain biking and hiking.

**Juanita Villanueva  
Cultivating Financial Stewardship**

“I enjoy gardening – nurturing something and watching it grow,” said Juanita Villanueva, CHC, CPC, Director of the Clinical Practice Group (CPG). Since joining the ZSFG Dean’s Office in August 2025, she has taken a similar approach to cultivating systems and partnerships that optimize insurer reimbursement for care provided by the CPG, which includes all UCSF physicians working at ZSFG.



Juanita Villanueva, CHC, CPC

One of her primary responsibilities is supporting timely submission of claims to insurers like Medicare and Medi-Cal, and identifying and solving any obstacles to payment. Within UCSF at ZSFG, her team works with departments to review claims, finesse coding of billable services, and discuss any trends in denied claims. Ms. Villanueva leads an IT team that fixes billing-related features of the Epic electronic health record (EHR) system, and develops new features to automate certain aspects of claims submissions.

She also works closely with SFDPH. While SFDPH handles hospital and facility-

related claims to insurance companies, such as X-rays and room and board for patients, UCSF focuses on professional fees for services performed by physicians. Although UCSF and SFDPH care for the same patients, their billing processes are completely separate and not visible to one another. “We meet regularly, so if we add a new service line or start seeing a lot of [claim] denials, we can collaborate on addressing challenges or building new features in Epic,” said Ms. Villanueva.

She also meets regularly with insurers to address issues that hinder prompt reimbursement of claims, which is critical to maintaining the financial sustainability of UCSF at ZSFG. “The ideal is to submit claims, get reimbursed, and clear your A/R (accounts receivable) in 90 days or less, but sometimes insurers may deny a claim over and over,” said Ms. Villanueva. “Sometimes we appeal claims that are more than a year old.”

In addressing these delicate situations, she brings more than 35 years of experience at institutions including UCSF Health, UC Davis, Dignity Health, and Highland Hospital in Oakland, as well as organizational skills and a spirit of diplomacy. “Rather than go in like a bull in a china shop, I say, ‘Could you help us understand this denial rating? Did your regulations change? It’s my understanding that you follow Medicare rules, and here’s the specific Medicare rule,’” said Ms. Villanueva. “We try to be polite and professional, but also direct. I have respect for what the insurer says, and work to earn their trust in my knowledge base. Sometimes they’ll take notes and come to our next meeting saying, ‘I shared what you told us with this other unit, and it’s spot on, so we’re going to fix that problem.’ It’s very collaborative.”

In addition to overseeing the revenue cycle, Ms. Villanueva and her team help ensure all CPG faculty are properly credentialed, and respond quickly when insurers add new

credentialing requirements. Among other responsibilities, they also write contracts with health plans and handle any legal elements of claims.

“The Dean’s Office brings us together to follow our academic mission and provide high-quality patient care,” said Ms. Villanueva. “We try to align operationally and collaborate across departments while supporting financial stewardship.”

In addition to gardening, Ms. Villanueva values spending quality time with her family and cheering on her grandchildren at their baseball, basketball, and soccer games.

-Elizabeth Chur

Editors: Neil Powe, Leonard Telesca, Ali Cunningham

**SPOTLIGHT**

- **Anna Chodos, MD, MPH** has been selected as the inaugural Site Chief of Geriatrics at Zuckerberg San Francisco General (ZSFG)
- **Joel Ernst, MD**, Former Chief of the Division of Experimental Medicine, is the recipient of the Phil Hopewell Mentorship Award, a lifetime achievement award for mentoring scientists in TB research. The American Society for Clinical Investigation has also elected Dr. Ernst as an Honorary member.
- **Deborah Grantz** has been appointed as the interim Division Manager for the Division of HIV, Infectious Diseases, & Global Medicine.
- Congratulations to **Vivek Jain, MD, MAS, HIV/ID** and **Scott Steiger, MD, DGIM**, who have both been announced as 2026 DOM Master Clinicians

