



**Editor's note:** "Clinical Currents" is a new monthly column where **DBH Chief Medical Officer Dr. John Kennedy** will share insights, experiences, and perspectives from the evolving world of behavioral health. In each installment, Dr. Kennedy will offer a window into the clinical, policy, and human dimensions of this work and the many ways it touches Ohio's communities.

### **From Curiosity to Calling: A Journey Into Behavioral Health Leadership**

These days I serve as Chief Medical Officer for the Ohio Department of Behavioral Health, but like many careers in medicine, mine didn't begin with certainty. In fact, it started with a doubt.

As a medical student at The Ohio State University, I found the work intellectually engaging and challenging, but something felt off. While my classmates seemed driven by a passion for medicine or surgery, I struggled to find that same sense of purpose. Many times, I questioned whether I was in the right field. That uncertainty led me to take an unconventional step -- a two-year leave of absence to pursue a master's degree in hospital administration. That decision changed everything.

During graduate school, I met a professor and mentor who profoundly changed my life. He spoke candidly about living with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), about the challenges it posed, and just as importantly, about how psychiatric treatment had transformed his life. Hearing his story, his challenges, his recovery, and his success as an award-winning educator and researcher sparked something in me. It fascinated me and planted a seed about a potential career.

After completing graduate school, I decided to reenter medical school. My first clinical rotation was in psychiatry. It didn't take long to realize that I had found my passion.

That path soon led me to another fascinating intersection — psychiatry and the law. During my residency at OSU, I cared for a patient whose case required a report for the court. The

experience opened my eyes to the complexities of forensic psychiatry, ultimately leading me to pursue a fellowship at the University of Rochester. After several years working in a maximum-security forensic hospital, my wife and I returned home to Ohio to begin the next chapter of our lives with a newborn in tow. I joined the faculty at the University of Cincinnati, where I led the forensic psychiatry division and fellowship program. It was deeply fulfilling work. I knew then this was going to be my path, and I loved it.

But, as life has a habit of doing, a new opportunity landed at my feet.

A transformational gift from the Lindner family to the Department of Psychiatry made possible the creation of a state-of-the-art psychiatric hospital, outpatient center, and research program in Cincinnati. Drawing on my background in hospital administration, I realized this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to build a hospital from the ground up. Serving as the inaugural Chief Medical Officer, I gained invaluable experience shaping clinical systems, advancing quality, and leading multidisciplinary teams. The experience forever changed me. That role set the stage for two decades of leadership across health care organizations, focused on quality, efficiency, development, and compliance.

Yet even as my career evolved, one earlier experience stayed with me. During my final year of residency, I completed an elective rotation with the (then named) Ohio Department of Mental Health. There, under the guidance of leaders like Drs. Dale Svendsen, Howard Sokolov, and Michael Hogan, I saw firsthand how a state government agency shaped and led mental health public policy. It left a lasting impression. Public service, I realized, would be an honorable and rewarding way to apply my training.

Last year, that belief came full circle. When the opportunity arose to serve as Chief Medical Officer here at DBH, I returned to Columbus and to the very place where that idea first took root.

Today, I consider it both a privilege and a responsibility to serve the people of Ohio. I'm fortunate to work alongside a team of experienced, knowledgeable, and dedicated civil servants who share a common mission of helping every Ohioan achieve the best mental health possible. Together, we are committed to advancing care, strengthening systems, and making a lasting difference in the communities we serve.

That's work worth doing.