



# Cooper Green *Mercy* Hospital

Jefferson Health Systems

WILLIAM A. BELL, Sr.  
Commissioner of Health and Community Services

SANDRAL HULLETT, M.D.  
Chief Executive Officer and Medical Director

January 5, 2010

## MESSAGE FROM THE CEO:

I wish you a Happy New Year favored with Peace and Happiness.

Time seems to pass a bit faster than I would like, I cannot believe it was February 1, 2001 (ten years ago) when I came to Cooper Green Mercy Hospital on a 6 month temporary assignment. I cannot say it has always been fair, but definitely a constant challenge and never a dull day (I like it that way).

Hard work and a great staff, with the support of the community among many who have kept us in their prayers, has enabled me to be noted by the Birmingham Business Journal Businessperson of the Year in Birmingham.

I am attaching the article and hope you enjoy it.

Thank you for your encouragement and for giving me the opportunity to work and learn with you during these years.

May God continue to bless you and I hope to see you soon.

Have a Happy, Prosperous and Healthy New Year.

Sincerely,

Sandra Hullett, MD  
CEO & Medical Director

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## Businessperson of the Year

**Dr. Sandral Hullett**  
Cooper Green Mercy Hospital



THE FOX6 BIRMINGHAM  
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AND FRIDAYS AT 7:20 A.M.

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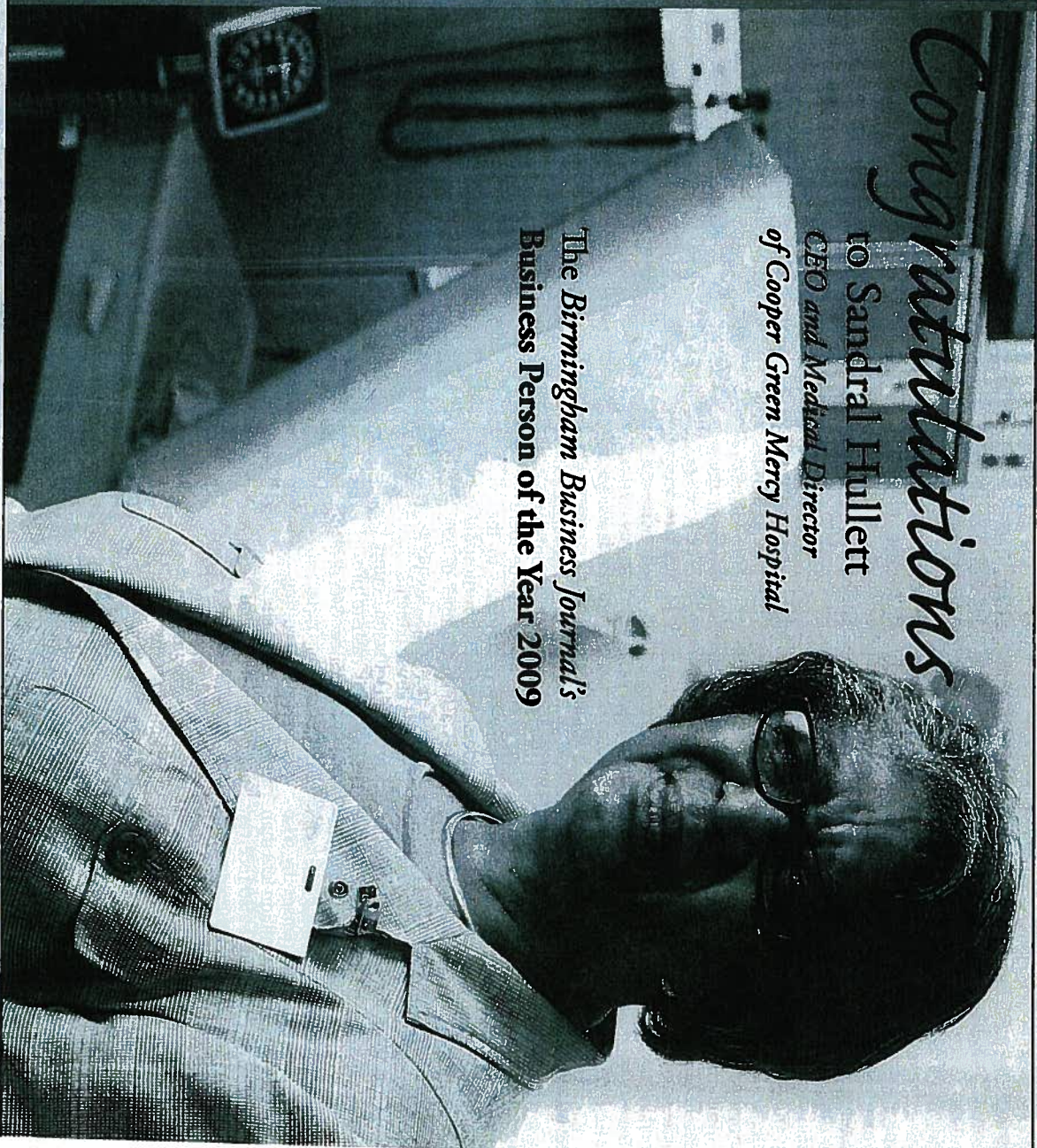
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# *Congratulations*

to **Sandra Hullert**  
*CEO and Medical Director*  
of *Cooper Green Mercy Hospital*

*The Birmingham Business Journal's*  
**Business Person of the Year 2009**



# The miracle worker

## Sandra Hullett turned JeffCo's public hospital into a national model

BY LAUREN B. COOPER | STAFF

Dr. Sandra Hullett recalls a story about a boy who was bitten by a snake as he and his friends played in a rural community in south Alabama's Lowndes County.

The clock ticked, she said, to get the boy the medical attention he needed to survive. But going from house to house in the rural community, his friends found one neighbor who didn't have a phone to call a doctor and another who didn't have a car to rush him to the nearest hospital, which was an hour away.

Five hours passed before the young boy ever received medical attention, but, miraculously, he survived.

This story is just one of many shared by Hullett, CEO and medical director at Birmingham's Cooper Green Mercy Hospital, when discussing the drastic need for health care access in rural communities and why she was drawn to make a career of serving the underserved - groundwork that was laid by visits to her grandfather who lived in Lowndes County.

Health care access is a mission for Hullett and it's one she hasn't strayed from in a career that has spanned more than four decades. Along the way, she has garnered local, statewide and national attention for her work in both rural and urban communities.

And with a whirlwind of outside forces pushing against Cooper Green - Jefferson County on the brink of bankruptcy, decreased funding, looming public health care reform and increased patient numbers during the recession - Hullett has remained focused on making the state's only public hospital a respectable, and profitable, institution for the Birmingham community.

It's Hullett's actions over the span of her career, but particularly since she took the reins at Cooper Green in 2001, that have earned her recognition as the *Birmingham Business Journal's* Businessperson of the Year for 2009.

### A year of turmoil

In a year that saw Jefferson County struggle with \$3.2 billion in sewer debt and the resounding repercussions, Hullett said only one part-time employee was laid off at county-owned Cooper Green in 2009, and salaries for the hospital's 560 employees were untouched.

And to top it off, the hospital had a surplus of revenue for the fourth consecutive year. According to September 2009 year-end financial documents, Cooper Green's revenue exceeded its expenses by \$1.6 million. That's about \$2.9 million less than what it made in 2008. But it also received about \$6 million less from the county in 2009 than the year before.

Half of Cooper Green's funding comes from Jefferson County's indigent care fund, while 3 percent comes from private insurance and the remainder from Medicare

and Medicaid.

"The staff has been through a lot," said Hullett of the past year. "They've seen large numbers of people with not enough staffing. But they make it work."

The staff at Cooper Green has made it work for several years now under Hullett's leadership. She said there's a whole new attitude among employees and that compassionate care for Jefferson County's poorest citizens is taken very seriously.

As a result, this year, Cooper Green led all area hospitals in patient satisfaction scores in Medicare-produced surveys, including four out of five bedside care categories, beating out local competitors such as Brookwood Medical Center, St. Vincent's Birmingham and neighbor University Hospital at the University of Alabama at Birmingham in six out of 10 categories. Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta, one of

the largest public hospitals in the country, had scores that paled in comparison to the Birmingham facility.

That's a feat for public hospitals like Cooper Green, which are seeing an increase in patients without insurance, a decrease in public funding dur-

ing the recession and are often referred to as hospitals of last resort, said Michael Morrissey, director of the Lister Hill Center for Health Policy at UAB.

Hullett said new patients have increased by 18 percent and 65 percent have lost their insurance.

While public hospitals are rare overall, said Morrissey, it will be interesting to see how impending health care reform will play out at Cooper Green. It's a topic that hasn't been talked about much.

If everyone is extended coverage and Medicaid is expanded, demand at public hospitals is likely to go down, he said. On the other hand, if payment levels are established to the extent other hospitals won't take newly enfranchised Medicaid recipients, then demand could increase for public care. But Morrissey said neither of those scenarios is likely to happen for another six to seven years.

Either way, Hullett is confident Cooper Green will still be there to provide health care to the underserved, since the hospital serves a large number of the county's prisoners, homeless and drug abuse patients.

And with Jefferson County strapped for cash to provide to Cooper Green, Hullett's trying to be economical without cutting services. She said she's applying for federal grants and stimulus money, using government procured software for the electronic med-

ical system it's required to install by 2014 and purchasing much-needed equipment only using revenue the hospital generates.

### The transformation

When Hullett signed on in 2001, Cooper Green had a difficult reputation. She said she realized quickly that drastic changes needed to be made or the hospital would be closed. So she set out to provide mandatory customer service and cleanliness programs for employees. And in that first year, about 175 staff members were laid off.

Soon after, then-County Commissioner Larry Langford pushed for a consultant to come in and take a look at the hospital's long-term future. Hullett said that move proved

to be a pivotal point for the public hospital - when it went from a charitable organization in the red to a profitable business that provided compassionate care.

"That first year, we made four

times what we had paid to the consultant," she said. "People didn't believe you could be a compassionate business and deliver services. That's when we started making money."

The first order of business was to change the billing process and take a look at the programs that generated funds. Hullett said the hospital began working with the prison system, which is covered by BlueCross BlueShield; helped people to enroll in Medicare and Medicaid; started charging a co-pay; and offered counseling to those who couldn't pay their bills - a service many people declined, opting to pay their bills instead, she said.

"Health care should have a worth to you," said Hullett. "People should take ownership in their health care."

Those words are gospel to Hullett and are the foundation on which her career seems to be based.

### Native daughter

Growing up in the Hudson City neighborhood of Birmingham, which is now Inglenook, Hullett graduated from Carver High School. She attended Alabama A&M University and received a bachelor's degree in biology.

After a short stint as a teacher in Coosa County, she moved to Hackensack, N.J., to work as a research assistant at the Charles Pfizer-



Maywood Cancer Research Division. From there she went to New York to work at Columbia University's Institute of Cancer Research.

It was in New York, after years of medical research, that Hullert said she realized she wanted to be a physician. After working on a research paper, a colleague suggested Hullert's name be listed as co-author. But the lead physician on the study said he wouldn't put his name next to anyone who wasn't a medical doctor and instead listed her name in the back of the study in acknowledgments.

So she soon applied to the all-women's Medical College of Pennsylvania and was accepted in 1972.

"I was ready for the people," she said. "There I saw all different role models and realized you can be a professional, have a family, enjoy work, and you didn't have to act like a man. That was important to me."

And, to pay for her last year of medical school, she joined the National Health Service Corps and returned to Alabama, digging deeper into her interest in rural health care.

After a residency in family practice, Hullert joined West Alabama Health Services in Eufaula, Ala., east of Tuscaloosa in Greene County, a place where she found herself for the next 23 years and still calls home.

While those years were devoted to providing health care in that community, Hullert's work became well known and respected across the country.

During that time, she received a master's in public health from the University of Alabama at Birmingham and two honorary doctorates of humane letters. She served on the board of trustees of the University of Alabama for nearly 20 years, was named one of America's leading black doctors by Black Enterprise magazine and was named the first Public Health Hero by UAB's School of Public Health - all before returning to Birmingham to take the top spot at Cooper Green.

And at age 40, she married Charles Robertson, a retired education administrator. She has two stepdaughters and a

handful of grandchildren.

Even after coming back to her hometown of Birmingham, Hullert remains active in local, statewide and national groups, advocating health care and access in rural communities.

Though she no longer actively sees patients, she is currently receiving ongoing research support for her work from the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the National Eye Institute.

#### Mentor and coach

The list of Hullert's accomplishments and awards is endless, yet she's ever mindful of why she has made such strides in the medical field for more than 40 years: Health care is not a privilege, it's a right for every American, she said.

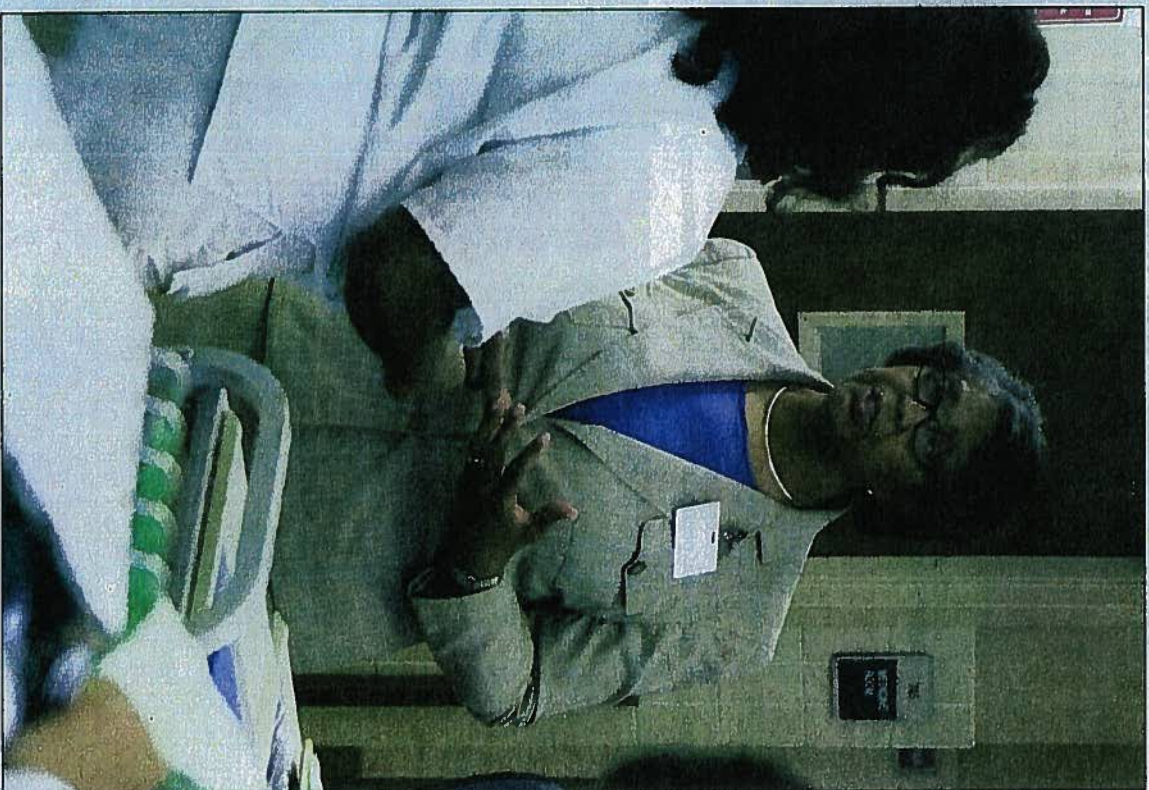
And that's what she's tried to teach everyone who crossed her path, said Paulette Wicks, who recently retired from public health service and worked with Hullert in Greene County, starting in 1987.

"Her model became my model," said Wicks. "There is no American that should be without health care. I would say the welfare mother that goes to a community health center should receive the same health care that a Fortune 500 CEO does."

Wicks said she and Hullert joke about when Hullert will retire or move on to another career. But plans like retirement don't register for the 63-year-old Hullert, said Wicks, as long as there's work to be done and her commitment to the right of health care is still there.

Wicks said Hullert's management style is based on mentoring and coaching and it's one she adopted when she began to manage her own team in public health service. But more importantly, Hullert's style is humble and unassuming, she said.

"I would observe her with her staff or ordinary people and it was never 'I am Dr. Sandral Hullert,'" she said. "I always say she's one of the few people that isn't aware of her greatness and, if you didn't know who she was, you'd think she was Ms. Hullert."



FILE PHOTO

Under Sandral Hullert's tenure as CEO, Cooper Green's work force has remained steady.

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# TIMELINE:

## *Dr. Sandra Hullett's Career*

**SEPT. 11, 1946**  
Sandra Hullett is born in Birmingham.



Source: FBI research

**1968** Begins working as research assistant at the Charles Pfizer-Maywood Cancer Research Division in New Jersey



**1972** Enters medical school at Medical College of Pennsylvania, graduating in 1976

**1970** Moves to New York to be a research assistant at Columbia University's Institute of Cancer Research

**1967** Receives degree in biology from Alabama A&M University

**1987** Receives a master's degree in public health from the University of Alabama at Birmingham

**1979** Becomes health services director at West Alabama Health Services Inc. in Eufaula, where she'll work for nearly 23 years.



**1982** Becomes member of the University of Alabama System board of trustees, a position she would hold for nearly 20 years.



**2001** Named one of America's Leading Black Doctors by Black Enterprise magazine.



**2001** Becomes interim CEO and medical director at Cooper Green Hospital in Birmingham. More than a year later, Hullett would accept the top spot permanently

