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Houston pediatric chief's abrupt exit triggers fear, disappointment within transgender community

By **Julian Gill**, Staff writer

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Dr Catherine Gordon stepped down as pediatric chair at Texas Children's Hospital after seven months in the post. Gordon previously served as professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School and chief of adolescent medicine at Boston Children's Hospital. She is nationally and internationally recognized for her

research on factors that affect bone health in adolescents and young adults.

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Some parents of transgender children are expressing fear and disappointment after the sudden resignation of Texas Children's Hospital's chief pediatrician, who has been a vocal advocate for continuing care for transgender patients being targeted by a recent statewide order.

Dr. Catherine Gordon, who served as the hospital's chief pediatrician for seven months, has been aligned with the broader medical community in supporting care that helps children transition from their assigned sex at birth to their affirmed gender.

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In a journal article published March 31, she spoke out against Republican Gov. Greg Abbott's recent directive to investigate the families of transgender children who seek out hormone therapy as child abusers. She touched on her extensive experience caring for transgender youth and said the state's involvement undermines the trusting relationship among patients, families and physicians.

So when the hospital on Thursday announced that Gordon had been replaced by Dr. Lara S. Shekerdemian, some parents of transgender children felt they had lost a powerful voice. Gordon previously served as a professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School and chief of adolescent medicine at Boston Children's Hospital.

"I knew she was an advocate and ally for us, someone in our corner," said one mother who has sought care for her transgender child at Texas Children's. The mother asked only to be identified by her first name, Lisa.

Gordon's article was published at a sensitive time for the wider transgender community and the hospital, which one month earlier revealed that it had halted hormone therapy for transgender children "to safeguard" providers and families from possible criminal penalties.

The hospital has said Gordon resigned and that her departure was not related to transgender medicine or the article's publication, which was "fully supported by the organization," a hospital spokesperson said Monday. The hospital, the spokesperson said, has continued to care for transgender patients in light of a recent statewide injunction by a Texas appeals court that blocks investigations triggered by the governor's order.

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"We are excited about our new leadership team who shares our deep commitment to our transgender and gender-diverse patients," the spokesperson said.

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But as questions linger about Gordon's sudden exit, the leadership change "sends a very disheartening message," said Lou Weaver, a transgender man in Houston and community advocate for transgender children and adults.

Gordon has not responded to a request for comment.

Lisa said she first learned of Gordon through her physicians at the nonprofit hospital, who assured her that the "head of pediatrics" was displeased both with the statewide directive and the hospital's decision to stop care. In her article, Gordon said the governor's order put the hospital and healthcare professionals in "an extremely difficult position."

"However, and importantly, we continued to offer as many services as we could, including psychological and medical counseling, and never closed our clinic," she said. "We have had to make adjustments to ensure we are providing care while understanding the ongoing government actions that evolve on a nearly daily basis, but continued care for our patients has remained our priority."

When talking to patients, Texas Children's physicians in the transgender medicine program sought to distance themselves from the hospital's temporary stoppage of hormone therapy by explaining that the decision was made by its legal department, according to Lisa and a Dallas-area mother who also sought care at the hospital, for her transgender child.

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Lisa was grateful to hear that Gordon and the medical staff supported continuing transgender healthcare. At the same time, she was disappointed Texas Children's would halt care in spite of the medical community's stance on the issue.

"At the slightest hiccup or threat, rather than standing up for the families and saying 'We will not be intimidated' and 'This is not a law' and standing with the larger medical community and using whatever power they have as a very powerful institution within the Texas Medical Center, they sort of just abandoned the patients," Lisa said.

Abbott's directive is based on a nonbinding legal opinion by Attorney General Ken Paxton, a fellow social conservative who is



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in North Texas, stopped accepting new patients late last year.

For her, the political pressure around the issue makes Gordon's departure "alarming," she said.

"It's also alarming on a larger level for me, as a native Texan and taxpayer, watching the trend of what's going on," she said. "Every physician is going to have to look in the mirror and decide if they're going to be an instrument of the state."

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Another mother of a transgender child, Rebekah Bryant, worries that Gordon's exit signals growing momentum within the broader political effort to cut off options for transgender healthcare in the next legislative session.

Bryant noted that her daughter is currently too young to seek medical interventions, though she hopes to have that option in the future.

"It's a little scary, especially with Texas Children's being so monumental," she said. "Because we're all sort of feeling access to care for our kids might go away."

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Julian Gill

INVESTIGATIVE REPORTER, HEALTH AND MEDICAL



Julian Gill is an investigative reporter for the Houston Chronicle.

His wide-ranging work on the medical beat, including a three-part narrative on a COVID-19 lung transplant patient, was recognized at the 2022 Texas Managing Editors awards, where he received top honors in the specialty reporting category and second place in the star reporter of the year category.

In addition to his extensive reporting on COVID, he has written about the effects of the Texas abortion ban, the maternal mortality crisis, and advances in the Texas Medical Center.

He joined the paper in 2018 after two years at the Denton Record-Chronicle, where he covered police and county government. He graduated from the University of North Texas. A San Antonio native, he is a die-hard Spurs fan and avid runner.

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