

# Leader Profile



## David M. Harlan, MD

Diabetes Division Chief  
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Witt/Kieffer is proud to have served  
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recruitment of this executive.

## Leaders Earn Their Stripes Every Day

David M. Harlan, MD, has had a distinguished career as a researcher, educator, clinician, and leader in the diabetes field, currently serving as the Diabetes Division Chief and Co-Director of the UMass Diabetes Center of Excellence at UMass Medical School and its clinical affiliate UMass Memorial Medical Center. What helped shape Dr. Harlan as a leader, however, was a distinguished medical career in the U.S. Navy and then subsequently in the U.S. Public Health Service, during which time he served as the National Institutes of Health's (NIH) internal research program's Diabetes Branch Chief. He retired from the US PHS in 2009 with the rank of Captain.

In the interview below, Dr. Harlan shares insights on how the military shaped his career and how it can build other medical leaders.

### Q: What drew you to the military when you were young?

**Dr. Harlan:** I had a generous offer from my parents to pay for my college education, with the understanding that the day I graduated I was on my own. I wanted to continue my research and education at a highly ranked medical school, but the price astounded me. So I applied for a Navy Health Professions scholarship. To be honest, the military was for me then simply a way to get a top quality medical education.

When I went to Duke [the Duke University School of Medicine], my plan was to get in and out in three years so my military obligation would be only three years. The Navy allowed me to do an internship and internal medicine residency at Duke, and also to do further research after graduating from medical school. When the time came to repay my military obligation, I was assigned to the Naval Medical Center in San Diego.

### Q: Did you like the military medical environment in San Diego?

**Dr. Harlan:** Within six months of my wearing the uniform each day, my whole thinking about the military and military medicine changed. Duke was a well-known medical center, but in San Diego I was seeing physicians who were as good or even better; academic medical center physicians are doing research and many other things; military docs are focused solely on delivering care to colleagues and comrades, and they get really good at it.

The other thing that surprised me was just how much I fell in love with the culture - the concept that you're in something for your colleagues and for a greater purpose, which is not as prevalent in the private sector as in the military. It seduced me.

### Q: How did you become a leader?

**Dr. Harlan:** I'm not comfortable calling myself a leader since I think that judgment should be rendered by one's team and colleagues. Even so, I suppose I had some nascent leadership skills but my military service certainly honed, refined, and matured those abilities. What civilians don't understand about the military is the importance

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of a centuries-old system, the chain of command, such that everybody has their role, duties and responsibilities and everybody relies on others carrying out their duties. My experience of civilian culture is that it's a bit more free-for-all. The military system made me aware of leadership, and I saw great examples of it.

Before I joined, I had this concept of the military that most people get from the movies. In the movies officers are barking orders and it's an intimidation thing. I thought I'd have to say, "Yes sir! No sir!" and follow orders all the time. In reality I was surprised by the respect and congenial nature of my superior officers. I found that I would do what superiors asked me to do eagerly because I didn't want to disappoint them. They were counting on me, and I felt privileged to be a part of this organization. I have always tried to lead following their example.

**Q: Are there specific skills or strengths you have that directly relate to your military experience?**

**Dr. Harlan:** Yes, and that still comes up at times. The environment here at UMass, like many medical centers, is less top-down than the military. I often hear that we are a matrixed organization and this is typical of most medical centers. My experience is that too often one is given responsibility but not the authority and accountability to act efficiently. I've always believed that it's hard to lead unless people know you're accountable, and that they are for their duties, too. I wouldn't say one system is better than another. I think many people at UMass would say, "Dave's leadership style is different than ours." But I think they would follow that up and say how effective we've been in diabetes.

**Q: Please complete (and elaborate upon) the following phrase: "Good leadership requires . . ."**

**Dr. Harlan:** Character, integrity, clear communications skills, and genuine mutual respect.

**Q: Do you think that healthcare organizations can/should be more proactive in recruiting current or former service members? How can they do so?**

**Dr. Harlan:** I would encourage it. I think people do things that are in their perceived self interest. If your motive in HR is to see academic medical centers function better, consider [veterans] seriously. The leadership skills that one learns in the military are second to none. If I have two equal candidates on paper and one of them served a career in the military, I would absolutely take the person from the military.

It's easy to think that if someone has spent a career in the military they have a narrow view, but my experience is that it is just the opposite. In the services, you move and are plopped into a completely new environment every two or three years. Over your career you will have adapted to many different and challenging situations. It expands your brain.

**Q: Finally, what advice do you have for service veterans who are transitioning into civilian careers and leadership opportunities?**

**Dr. Harlan:** "Anticipate that things run a little differently. Be patient. Keep your eyes open and listen very carefully to what your colleagues and leaders are saying, and adapt." And they will.