

## Agency for Change Podcast: Paul Dongilli, President and CEO of Madonna Rehabilitation Hospitals

Announcer:

Welcome to Agency For Change, the podcast that brings you the stories of people creating positive change in the world. We explore what inspires these changemakers, the work they're doing, and how they share their message. Each of us can play a part in change, and these are the people who show us how.

Lyn Wineman:

Welcome to another episode of the Agency For Change podcast. This is Lyn Wineman, president of KidGlov. And I'm starting with some advice today for anyone who wants a quick dose of positivity. Go to [Madonna.org](http://Madonna.org). That's M-A-D-O-N-N-A .org, and then click on the news tab. You'll see story after story of inspiration, of recovery, of innovation, and truly, just stories of the strength of the human spirit. And today, I get to talk with Paul Dongilli, president and CEO of Madonna Rehabilitation Hospitals, about how they are fulfilling their mission and experiencing incredible growth and momentum in the process.

Lyn Wineman:

Paul, what's it like being at the helm of such an inspiring organization?

Paul Dongilli:

Lyn, thanks for having me on today. I often say it's really an honor to have the job that I do. And it's humbling, really, when you think about it. I'd be remiss if I didn't say it's challenging. There's so much change happening in healthcare reform today. But there isn't a day that goes by that I'm not grateful for the opportunity to be part of Madonna, and part of the team that's making such a meaningful difference in the lives of people each and every day.

Lyn Wineman:

I appreciate you saying that, because healthcare is a complex business to be in, but it's a great business because you get to see the resiliency of the human spirit. And so for those of our listeners who are outside of Nebraska, and may not be familiar with Madonna, although I know you have a national reach, can you just give us the high level overview of the organization?

Paul Dongilli:

Sure. There's nothing I like more than talking about Madonna and the work that we do and the patients that we treat. First, I often say too, that Madonna is rehabilitation. That's who we are. That's all we do. We provide what we consider to be world-class physical medicine service and rehabilitation to children and adults from throughout the nation. We're a Catholic hospital with locations here in Lincoln, and in Omaha. And we have specialty programs in the areas of brain injury, spinal cord injury, stroke, or various neurological conditions, and pulmonary or complex medical conditions.

Paul Dongilli:

And we complete services so that those individuals who have disabling conditions, or have sustained catastrophic injuries, have the opportunity to improve and participate in life. We also lead research to improve outcomes and advance the field of rehabilitation. We try our best to educate the next generation of rehabilitation providers. And we try to promote wellness through community programs so that the patients that we serve, once they leave, can continue to improve and don't lose some of the improvements that they've made while they've been with us.

Paul Dongilli:

We serve, like I said, a variety of patients, not only from Nebraska, but the region and the nation. Last year, we served patients from 19 different states. We served a little over 2,300 inpatients, and close to 5,000 outpatients. And in, gosh, the beginning of, I think 2017, Modern Healthcare listed us as the 12th largest rehabilitation hospital in the country.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow.

Paul Dongilli:

Yeah, when people think about Lincoln, Nebraska, and Madonna being in Lincoln, or Omaha, or in Nebraska, Nebraska has the 12th largest rehab hospital in the country.

Lyn Wineman:

That's really pretty cool. We should be putting that in our Chamber of Commerce advertising for sure, I think. And I appreciate you explaining that, because I know you can't put all of that on a sign out in front of the building, but sometimes I think the word rehabilitation, well that's exactly what you do. We don't think of all the breadth of those services. And I have to say, I feel the breadth of your services, because it seems like everyone I know from this region has a story of how Madonna has touched their lives.

Lyn Wineman:

You probably don't know this, but my grandparents were there for a while, separately. And we celebrated Easter in the patient lobby one year. We had an Easter egg hunt down the hall, which maybe caused some small disruption. My son was treated for a sports-related concussion. I mean everybody I know. I'm curious, Paul, what are some of your favorite stories of the work that's being done?

Paul Dongilli:

Well I'm glad to hear that we've been able to help some of your family members. And you're right, I'll often be out and about in the community, and people will stop me when they learn that I work at Madonna and recount a story or an experience here, which also just makes me proud and reinforces the work that we do. But I do have a few patient stories that come to mind that I think really exemplify the kind of work that we do, and the type of people that come to us seeking hope, hope of recovery.

Paul Dongilli:

Two come to mind, I guess. One is Sydney. And she is a patient that came to us from Kansas. And she had a severe car accident. It was winter and she was traveling from winter break back to school at KU. And she's from Kansas, from the town, Downs, Kansas. And it was 2014. She had this horrific car

accident and came to us. And the reason she's still so top of mind is because I just ran into her and her family last week. She still comes back every few weeks for some outpatient services, specialty services that we offer here at the Lincoln campus.

Paul Dongilli:

And so, her journey, her recovery journey, has lasted from 2014 and continues. And she went through so many levels of care here as an inpatient in several different areas, and then our comprehensive day program. And then her family lived in onsite housing while she continued to receive the outpatient services before she could go home. And through all of that, it's not that she's the way she was prior to her injury. She still struggles with limitations in areas, but she's back to riding and showing horses. She's back at KU trying to finish that master's degree that was interrupted when she had her car accident.

Paul Dongilli:

And I don't think there's a person that knows her that doesn't get inspired when they think about her story. And so you had mentioned the resiliency of the human spirit. And when I think of some of our patients and their families, and we treat families, it's not just the patient. We're treating families. And you think about their resiliency and what they've overcome. It's an inspiration.

Lyn Wineman:

That is amazing to think of a young woman pursuing a master's and riding and showing horses after that type of an injury. I think just hearing that story is inspirational and hopeful. And I know you had one more story as well.

Paul Dongilli:

Yeah, Josh. It's so funny how, again, you think of individuals, decades later, that still have an impact on you personally. And Josh is one. He had a stroke back in 2005. And at the time, he was 13 years old. And we don't hear very often about teenagers having strokes, but it's more common than what you would think. And the reason Josh resonated with me personally is because at that time, in 2005, my son was 13.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh, wow.

Paul Dongilli:

And I couldn't help but think, "What if this was our family?" And Josh and his family lived in Blair. And again, he was an inpatient here. But then he went back home, and just the dedication of his family, they drove from Blair every day once he discharged home to get specialized outpatient care here for just about a year. And the commitment that the family made for his recovery. And the reason he's still top-of-mind for me is because he had a younger sister. And like I said, we treat the family. And the family is so instrumental in the recovery of our patients. Well, she embraced his treatment and was so taken back by what she saw. Lo and behold, she went on to be an occupational therapist and now she works at our Omaha campus.

Lyn Wineman:

That's amazing. I love that story. And you're right, you don't think of 13 year old, young boys having a stroke and that kind of commitment. That's an hour drive back and forth every day, at least. That's really interesting. And, Paul, talking about driving. I actually drive by your Lincoln campus pretty frequently. And I've noticed a lot of construction activity going on. Can you tell us what's in store with the expansion and renovation project?

Paul Dongilli:

Oh yeah, I'd love to talk about that. With the podcast, you can't see my face. But if you could right now, there just would be a big smile on it because we're so excited with this, what we're calling our Lincoln campus expansion project. It really will change the face of our campus here in Lincoln. And it will also transform the care that we will deliver to our patients. It's the largest expansion project for the Lincoln campus. It will add just a little over 112 thousand square feet to our campus here.

Paul Dongilli:

It's a three-story patient wing or tower. And it will enable us to replace 59 patient rooms. We're not increasing the overall room capacity at the Lincoln campus, but some of our rooms, because I say we've been such good stewards of them, have kind of outlived their usefulness. And so, with this ever-changing population of patients that we see, and the higher acuity that they demonstrate, we needed larger spaces that could accommodate things like ventilators, and power wheelchairs, and families participating in the recovery process, being in the room to help their family member.

Paul Dongilli:

So we're really excited to add these 59 new patient rooms. We'll renovate 50 thousand square feet of the existing campus and create a new main entrance for the campus. So it's a huge project. And we're just so excited to be able to move forward with it.

Lyn Wineman:

That sounds like a great project. Right though, people's expectations have changed, but more than that, technology has changed. The types of patients you serve has changed. It sounds like a much-needed and much-deserved update that's really going to help people in new ways, which is fantastic. It's also got to be great for your staff. And I also know it's great for the local economy in Lincoln. How do you see Madonna's role in supporting economic development in the region?

Paul Dongilli:

When you talk about admitting patients here from 19 different states in this last year, we're bringing business into the Lincoln and surrounding communities. It's enabled us to grow and create additional need for support services in the Lincoln and the Omaha area. Madonna has grown. We now have 2,100 employees. We're in the top 20 businesses here in the city of Lincoln. And with the expansion project that I just talked about, it's a \$61 million project, expansion project. And we've been in dialogue with the Mayor's Council on Economic Development here. And we're tracking the amount of business that will arise from that project.

Paul Dongilli:

And from a dollar standpoint, we're projecting that 41 million out of that \$61 million will be from local businesses, construction companies, equipment vendors, the design, architects, 41 million. So we're really proud of being able to channel that business locally and help with the economic development in the city.

Lyn Wineman:

It's just proof that a rising tide lifts all ships, right? And it's fantastic. I mean, you think about economic development departments focusing so much on bringing new business in, but a big part of economic development is growing the businesses that are there so they can attract more people to the community too. I imagine all of these people coming from other states are staying in hotel rooms and supporting the local economy as well. And sometimes, do you feel like Madonna is one of the best kept secrets in town?

Paul Dongilli:

I would agree with that. I often say we are the best kept secret. And oftentimes, when you live in a community, you don't realize the resource that's in your own backyard.

Lyn Wineman:

Right.

Paul Dongilli:

And I think at times, our national reputation is recognized more by individuals in Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, South Dakota, than it is from people here in Lincoln.

Lyn Wineman:

Right, because we're just so used to it. We're used to you being here. You've been here forever, right, taking care of our families forever. So now I also know you have some projects happening in Omaha simultaneously. What can you tell us about that work?

Paul Dongilli:

Back in 2016, when we opened the Omaha campus, that was just a great day for us. We opened a 110-bed hospital there. That project was a \$93 million project at the time. And we were uncertain as to the growth that we might see as a result of that. And lo and behold, the demand for services has almost outgrown some of the space. And so, in this last year, we have added, it will actually open next month, a \$3.8 million physician's clinic that we attached to the building that will enable us to provide expanded physician clinic services in the area of rehabilitation.

Paul Dongilli:

One of the things that we did when we went to Omaha, was build on this notion of collaboration. We did not just want to take what we did here in Lincoln and duplicate it in Omaha. We knew that there was a great need for the services. But we wanted to build on that, and through partnerships with other organizations, create something that didn't exist. And so I can use as an example, we began dialogues with the University of Nebraska, the medical center, and their clinical partner, Nebraska Medicine. And again, rehabilitation, here within the state, is kind of a hidden jewel. But the University medical school in Omaha had a physical medicine and rehabilitation department or residency program to train physicians.

Paul Dongilli:

And we said, "Wouldn't it be great if, jointly, we could work with Nebraska Medicine and the University to establish that new department and create a residency program?" So we've done that. And the Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Department opened. It was the newest department to open within the University. The last was 25 years ago. So, they had not had a new department in 25 years. And in 2016, they opened what we call the PMNR, Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Department, and started the residency program.

Paul Dongilli:

And this year, we have 14 out of the 16 residency slots staffed. And those residents, hopefully, will stay in this area, or this upper-Midwest region, and help meet the needs of individuals from a physician standing, that need that service. So we think that has contributed greatly to the success. And when you look at the University and their investment in the Buffett Cancer Institute, well, in working with them, they said, "Gosh, we need a post-acute division of this cancer rehab program."

Paul Dongilli:

So now in concert with them, at our Omaha campus, we've established a cancer rehabilitation program, and it will be one of the few rehab hospitals in the country that has that dedicated accreditation through our accrediting body. So lots of exciting things happening at the Omaha campus as well. And again, I just think it speaks to the value of collaboration and kind of the brightness that exists when you're able to work with others.

Lyn Wineman:

Paul, I had no idea you were doing all of those things in Omaha. And I think that one of the things I love about healthcare is that I think you are one of the most collaborative industries. And to hear how you are working with the Buffett Cancer Center and UNMC to fill gaps, and build up the industry, and take care of people in new and innovative ways I think is really, really exciting. And I think that's probably part of the reason you have this level of national recognition. And I really am curious, because you did develop this recognition over years, and I know that you are known for both medical and physical rehabilitation. I know that you're known for the areas of spine and brain and stroke and pediatrics. But really, when it comes down to it, how does an organization that's based in Nebraska build that level of national prominence?

Paul Dongilli:

You're right. It just didn't happen overnight. It has evolved over the course of 15 years, really, a very conscious decision to make investments in the areas that would get us to this point, specifically, specialty training for our staff. The knowledge base of our staff is incredible, and there is an investment

to maintain that and continue the education that those individuals need to maintain that level of expertise.

Paul Dongilli:

Programs involve multiple levels of resources, and investing in components of programs so that it's comprehensive, including technology. Some of the technology that we have here at Madonna is only available at Madonna. When you are considering facilities in this Midwest region, the notion of robotics, and the robotic gait trainers that we have here, enable patients, when they're paired with our expert staff, to achieve really great things. And the outcomes that we're known for, that then attracts individuals from across the country.

Paul Dongilli:

I really have to say, it's an approach to care that balances those three things: a holistic approach to care, specialty trained staff, and then cutting-edge technology that, when paired with staff, achieve great things.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow. So now I know that you also have the Madonna Institute of Rehabilitation Science and Engineering. And is that part of how you get both the unique technology and the cutting-edge treatment?

Paul Dongilli:

That's a big part of it. Our research institute is here at the Lincoln campus, with a satellite at Omaha. But it is right adjacent to the patient tower. The research that we do is what we call translational research. It's research that can almost translate immediately into clinical practice. As a result, it enables us to advance the field of rehabilitation, but more importantly, meet the immediate needs of the patients that we're serving.

Paul Dongilli:

The focus of the Institute is an engineering or technology focus. There's so much engineering expertise and technology in our world. Part of the problem is it's never been adapted, or there's never been a conscious effort to take what we know there and adapt it so that it's accessible to people with disabilities. And oftentimes, you feel like you have to start from scratch, where we say, you don't. Let's take a look at what already exists and see how we might adapt that in order to meet the needs of people who have limitations, like the ones our patients demonstrate.

Paul Dongilli:

And I have a couple of examples that come to mind.

Lyn Wineman:

I'd love to hear them. I'd love to hear them.

Paul Dongilli:

It's been recognized. We applied for federal grants, and we've received federal grant dollars in order to support the research that we're doing. And most recently, we were able to achieve designation for an

RERC, Rehab Engineering Research Center. And it's in partnership with Penn State University as one of the primary partners. We were awarded a five-year, \$4.6 million grant from the National Institute on Disability, for independent living and rehabilitation research for this research engineer and research center. And that's a big grant dollar amount for us.

Lyn Wineman:

I think it's a big grant dollar amount for anybody. That's a lot of money. I mean, it's another form of economic development even when you think about that level.

Paul Dongilli:

Yeah. And that designation, we're one of now 15 centers across the country that has that RERC designation. So we're really proud of that. And what that designation charges us to do is to complete research and develop technology to support people with these activity limitations. And so that's what we've been doing, and that's the examples that I'd like to talk a bit about today because our research, and some of the technology that we've developed, has been commercialized and is now available for institutions across the world.

Lyn Wineman:

That's amazing.

Paul Dongilli:

One of which, is what we originally called our First Hope technology. What we see at times with people coming into Madonna, is they have such limitations in their ability to use their arms, their hands, or really large parts of their body. We developed this technology that would allow them to use sipping and cupping through their mouth, on various buttons or switches or sensors to be able to call the nurse, control the TV, adjust lighting, open shades within their room.

Paul Dongilli:

And those sound like such small things, but when you are so dependent that you need help from an individual just to do those simple things, it's very discouraging. And we call it The First Hope because it gave people a sense of control over their immediate environment and the hope that this was just the first step in their recovery. Well, lo and behold, we shared this with Korbel Medical, which is the leading medical device manufacturer. And they now have integrated this device into their nurse call system that's available for hospitals and facilities across the country. So Madonna will get a small royalty for that that we can then use to invest back into the research institute, to fund new research. So again, that's an example of developing technology that can meet the needs of folks and advance the field.

Paul Dongilli:

And the other example is our gait assistance device, it's called an ICARE or an Intelligently Controlled Assisted Rehabilitation Elliptical. And again, our researchers took a look at various ellipticals and found one that closely mirrored the natural gait pattern of walking and adapted that with a motor, support for individuals who had difficulty getting on and off. The motor provided assistance. It could be programmed. And as a result of that, it has been commercialized and is now available through SportsArt,

a company that wanted to have maybe a division, or start a division, of equipment that could promote health and wellness and meet the needs of people with disabling conditions.

Paul Dongilli:

So that's now being sold internationally through SportsArt. So that RERC designation, and that research out of our institute, is resulting in this kind of innovation that's being commercialized and is now available nationwide. So we're, again, really proud of that fact, and being able to make that kind of contribution and advance the field.

Lyn Wineman:

That's just ... I feel like I should say congratulations to you, the whole team, everyone at Madonna. And you wonder, when Madonna was founded years ago, I think by a group of nuns, right?

Paul Dongilli:

Yes.

Lyn Wineman:

Could they have even imagined what kind of impact they would have across the country, across the world from this wonderful organization based in Lincoln and Omaha, Nebraska?

Paul Dongilli:

You're right. The Benedictine Sisters who originally founded Madonna, and Sister Phyllis, at the time, had a vision. And she recognized the value of rehabilitation. She often would say individuals who, at that time, were in nursing facilities, yes, some had to be there, but others, she said, "If they just had access to some good rehabilitation, they could improve, regain functional skills and integrate back into their communities at some level." And she had that great vision. That really kind of set the ball in motion and got us to where we are today.

Lyn Wineman:

That's just wonderful. That also makes me think too. Like today, people who have ideas and passions, who start initiatives and things today. Paul, the things that you and your team are starting today at Madonna, think of the ripple effect of that decades from now and how that's going to launch into new things that will make people's lives better. And I know, Paul, you, as with many great leaders, you credit much of the organization's success and momentum to the people who work there. What is it that you would most like us to know about your staff?

Paul Dongilli:

I'm so glad you asked that question because I often say Madonna is who we are today because of our staff. We have awesome staff. And I believe that they view the work that they do as much more than just a job. They view it as a calling. It's a commitment to serve. One of Madonna's core values is hospitality. We think of hospitality as a very welcoming environment, but I believe our staff really look at it as an openness to the call of those in need. And it provides, I think, a sense of purpose. And if that's a good fit for you as an individual, then you find it a very rewarding place to be. And so I just think our staff embraced that kind of thought process, and as a result, we see the stories that we do about recovery.

Lyn Wineman:

Absolutely. That leads me to want to know, I've got to imagine the experience of working in a rehabilitation hospital, while I'm sure it's not easy, I've got to imagine it can be very rewarding. How does it differ from a more traditional healthcare setting?

Paul Dongilli:

It does differ greatly, and especially for a place like Madonna. We have multiple levels of care. And the average length of stay for a patient in each of those levels is just about 30 days.

Lyn Wineman:

That's a long time.

Paul Dongilli:

We will have patients, like for instance, when I told you the story about Sydney, she started in one level of care, and I believe she spent about four weeks there. Then she left that level, and she entered the next level and spent another, I believe, six to eight weeks there. And then she left that level and went to outpatient and spent months there. So individuals who go through our doors spend a long period of time, and staff begin to develop relationships.

Paul Dongilli:

We're all social beings, and I think one of the consequences of this whole pandemic, we've realized how social we are, and how that lack of interaction can be so detrimental. And just the ability for individuals as they recover, to recover, but then forming relationships with individuals is, again, another kind of reward for the work that they do. And so I think that's different here because of the long length of stay. It creates that opportunity where oftentimes in other hospital settings, the length of stay is much shorter, so there isn't that opportunity.

Lyn Wineman:

Paul, I could hear from your stories of Sydney, and Josh as well, the relationships aren't just with the patient. You're forming relationships with the families as well. So it's got to be a very comprehensive and emotional experience. And I'm sure we have healthcare professionals listening to this podcast. If anyone is interested in looking into a career opportunity at Madonna, what is the best route for them connect with you?

Paul Dongilli:

Well you opened this podcast by identifying our website. And so yes, I would encourage folks, if you want to learn more about Madonna, or career opportunities here, you go to our website, there's a tab that you can click on that will provide you with some information about job availability, as well as how to move forward with an application.

Lyn Wineman:

I do think right now, because of what we've all been through, more and more people are looking to add meaning to their lives, and meaning to their careers. And it would be a really interesting way to do so. And now, Paul, you've obviously had a lot of success leading a very complex and dynamic organization.

And actually, after listening to you today, it's even more complex and more dynamic than I even knew 30 minutes ago. But what advice do you have for other leaders who hope to make a positive impact?

Paul Dongilli:

Well, I think at the very core, you have to have a passion for the work that you're doing, and a commitment to it. I think if that is there, that sets the stage for success. But it's not the only thing. We all know that in our work, no matter how passionate you are for it, you're going to encounter setbacks or discouragements, where things don't work out, or you make errors. Gosh, I don't want to count the number of errors I've made over the years. But using them as opportunities for learning and growing, and using them to help shape what you will be as you move into the future.

Paul Dongilli:

Gosh, some of the biggest growth spurts I've had have arisen out of a discouraging situation, or a huge mistake that I made. And instead of feeling defeated, try and say, "Okay, how can I learn from this and not repeat it in the future?" So, we all have discouraging times or setbacks, but if we look at them as growth opportunities, then I think it helps prepare us for the future.

Lyn Wineman:

I think there's that saying, you either win or succeed, or you learn, right? And taking those discouraging situations and learning from them and letting them shape you. But man, it can be hard at the time. And, Paul, that was actually very inspiring. But the next question I'm going to ask you is one of my favorite questions. I ask it in every podcast because I'm inspired by motivational and inspirational quotes. Could you give us a few of your own, Paul Dongilli words of wisdom, for our listeners?

Paul Dongilli:

Yeah. Well, take them for what they're worth.

Lyn Wineman:

Which is a lot. Which is a lot.

Paul Dongilli:

Well first of all, I'm an old speech pathologist. I started my career here at Madonna working on a brain injury and stroke unit, and just evolved into my role, I say, over the decades. And so coming from that background, I often tell people it's all about communication, and it's all about relationships, and that if you can develop credible messages, rooted in truth, and communicate it in a way that's authentic and easily understood, you can engage people and build a team. But as you do that, you have to practice candor, but with tact and diplomacy. It's so important to think before speaking. So I often say it's just all about communication. And so those are my, I guess, words of wisdom.

Lyn Wineman:

Those are great. I mean, that's kind of a fundamental of marketing. I come from the field of marketing, and being able to speak credible messages, rooted in truth, authentically, as you said, I think people want that now more than ever too. They look to leaders for authenticity and vulnerability and maybe not all the kind of polish and hype that we've had in previous years. So I think that is great advice, great

words of wisdom. Paul, as we wrap up our time together today, what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work that is being done at Madonna?

Paul Dongilli:

You know I've thought about this. And really, what I'd like the listeners to know is not words that maybe come from us, but from those that we serve. I frequently, because our staff are so great, get thank you notes from patients and families highlighting the names of staff, or just staff in general. And I received one a few weeks ago. And at the end of the note, it was the wife of a patient that we served. She said, "I will be forever grateful to Madonna's staff for their passionate work in giving broken people new life." And I think that's what I would like our listeners today to think about Madonna. That our staff are here, and what we want to do is give people who others often think of as broken the opportunity for a new life.

Lyn Wineman:

Paul, you just gave me a little bit of a chill. And I say that in all sincerity because you've done the same for not just one, but multiple members of my family as well. And I've got to really thank you for taking time out today to share more about the amazing work of Madonna, more than I even realized, and more about the people of Madonna. And I, for one, feel very, very lucky to have your organization in our region. And I appreciate your time.

Paul Dongilli:

Well, thank you for giving me this opportunity. Like I said, I always like talking about Madonna. So thanks and have a good day.

Lyn Wineman:

Thanks so much, Paul.

Announcer:

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