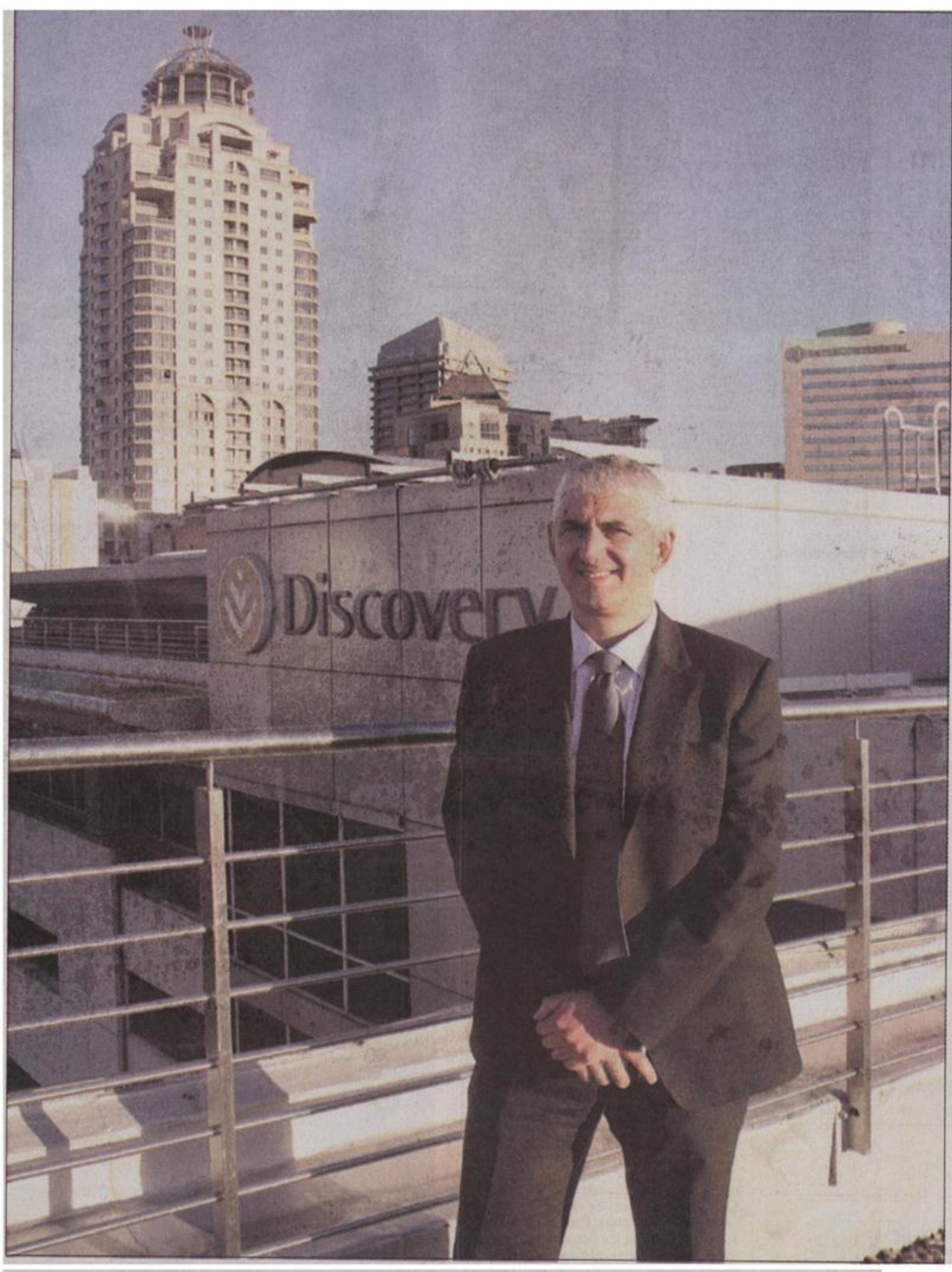


Travelling the path of discovery towards a more meaningful life

Dr Jonathan Broomberg is CEO of Discovery Health, SA's largest medical aid scheme, and a perennial student. He tells Marika Sboros how his time as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford University shifted his career away from the practice of clinical medicine towards the rich and diverse path that he travels today



LONG AND WINDING ROAD: Dr Jonathan Broomberg has spent most of his career working at the interface between the healthcare system and society, in both the public and private sectors. Picture: PUXLEY MAKGATHO: Broomberg enjoys a vigorous training run with Discovery staff last year in the run-up to the 2010 Soweto Marathon, below. Picture: © JONATHAN BROOMBERG

Q What was your earliest ambition?

A I wasn't clear about my career choices when I was younger. I thought I might do many different things. Both my parents are lawyers, so I definitely thought about law, but I was interested in science as well. Only right at the end of high school did my choice of medicine firm up.

Q What made you choose medicine?

I was quite influenced by some doctors in my extended family who I respected very much. I also had a view that medicine would be a good combination of science and arts and the social sciences. I enjoyed both in my high school career.

Q How do you define health?

A precious gift that we take for granted, and only know how valuable it is when it's absent through illness or pain.

Q And healing?

There are many different dimensions to healing. Certainly medicine is brilliant at physical healing — surgery is the best example of that. But there are psychological dimensions to healing that are equally important, and these are often neglected in the modern healthcare system.

Q What made you move from the daily practice of medicine into business?

It was a long and interesting journey. After medical school I was fortunate to win a Rhodes scholarship. At Oxford University in the late 1980s, I had the privilege of broadening my education by studying PPE (politics, philosophy and economics). That opened my mind to the social and economic dimensions of healthcare.

Q So what did you do when you came back to SA?

I worked at the Centre for Health Policy, which was the first health policy think-tank in SA, and we did a lot of analysis and research critiquing the apartheid healthcare system, and laying some of the foundations for post-apartheid healthcare policies. I also continued studying, and completed a MSc and then a PhD in economics at the University of London. I am a perennial student.

Q And after that?

I have spent most of my career working at the interface between the healthcare system and society in both the public and private sectors. I joined Discovery Health in 2005 and became CEO of Discovery Health in 2010.

Q Do you miss seeing patients?

When I first left clinical medicine I missed seeing patients very deeply.

Q What did you miss in particular?

The intensity and immediacy of the personal interactions, and the reward of making patients better, of helping people.

Q Any regrets about moving into the business of health?

Not at all. I find my work hugely inspiring, stimulating and rewarding every day.

Q What does your work entail now?

It has many dimensions, but principally involves leading a highly competent team of senior managers and together with them running a large and complex

organisation. This means navigating many complex decisions and challenges every day.

Q What time does your day start?

I wake up at 6.30am most days, earlier when I travel to spend time with colleagues in our operations all around the country.

Q How do you start your day?

I always make breakfast for the family. Some days of the week I exercise; on others days I do the school lifts and get to work just after 8am.

Q What time do you get home?

Typically around 7pm, but some days it's later than that.

Q Do you take work home?

Unfortunately I do. I often have functions and meetings at night, and also need to spend some time catching up on e-mail.

Q Discovery Health is SA's biggest health insurer by far, with close to 2.6m members. That must be stressful, with all the decisions you have to make?

There are many big decisions to take daily, but to be honest, I don't find that at all stressful. The main stress I face is the extensive demands on my time, and the long hours away from my family. In previous jobs, I've had more time with family and more ability to structure my own time.

Q Your staff complement is more than 3 500. Isn't that stressful?

Not at all. I find working with my colleagues an inspiring and energising experience. Discovery has a unique and driven culture of high energy, hard work and strong collegiality. That really takes most of the stress out of the job.

Q How do you cope with stress?

Exercise is my major stress reliever. It's critical to my happiness and survival. I'm disciplined about making sure I never do less than three or four sessions a week, and no fewer than three hours cumulatively a week. My main exercise is running; I'm a passionate runner, but I also do stationary cycling and some free weight exercises.

Q What distance do you run?

In recent years, quite a few standard marathons. I've been lucky enough to run many in SA, but also the London, New York and Berlin marathons.

Q Any favourites?

No. Each has been a different, wonderful experience.

Q Have you ever considered running the Comrades?

No. I don't think I could find the time to train for it, but I fear I would be pushing my body to the point of doing damage. A standard marathon seems a much more sensible distance.

Q Do you run on your own?

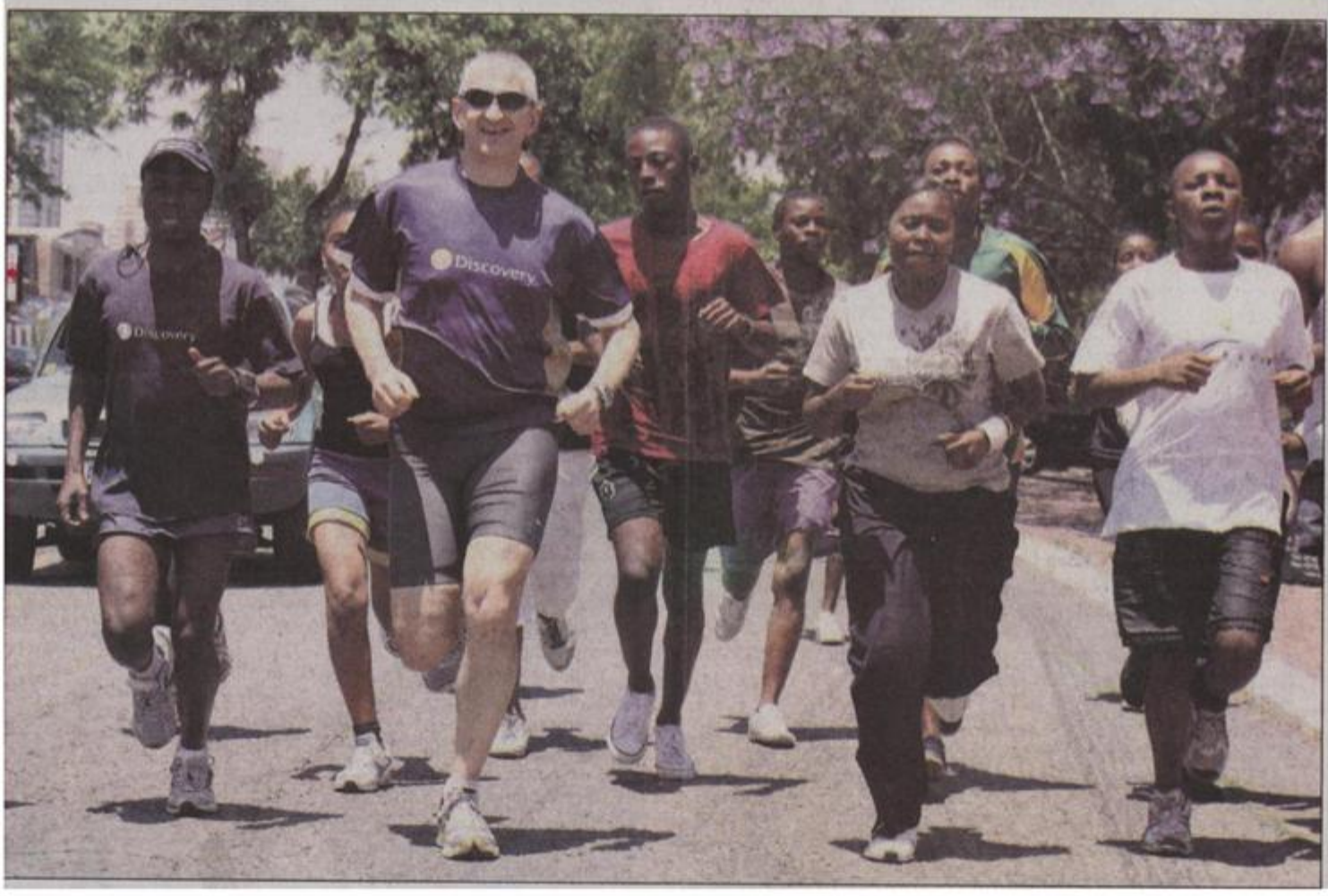
Yes, usually. I'm very happy running alone, in fact I prefer it. I run when I can fit it in.

Q What do think about when running?

I listen to audio books, so I get a lot of reading done — close to a book a week while running. It's quite an efficient use of time. But I also think about all kinds of things, like issues at work, or the pain in various parts of my body.

Q What is your diet like?

I try to eat very healthily whenever possible. I try to stick to a low-fat and reasonably high-protein diet, with very little red



meat, and as much fresh fruit and vegetables as possible. I do indulge more than I should in chocolate.

Q Do you ever cook at home?

I make a mean breakfast, and very good omelettes on Sunday nights, but for the rest I'm

extremely disadvantaged in the kitchen.

Q What do you drink during the day?

A lot of coffee, probably four cups a day. It's one of my vices, but I also try to drink quite a bit of water — at least

several cups a day.

Q Why do you drink so much water?

I believe my colleagues in Vitality who tell me it's good for me to stay well hydrated.

Do you drink much alcohol?

I love single malt whisky and good red wine. I guess I drink either whisky or wine about four to five days a week on average, but in very moderate quantities.

Q Do you take vitamin supplements?

Vitamin C and Omega 3s and 6s with my breakfast oats.

We are very lucky to share a beautiful weekend place in the Magaliesberg with some close friends. We try to get there once or twice a month, whenever we can.

Q What can't you live without?

Running, coffee and my family, in no particular order.

Q What was a defining moment in your life?

Can I have more than one? Sure. One was meeting my wife, Lauren. Our partnership is the foundation of my life. The second has to be the birth of my two children — Josh, 14, and Katya, 11. A third was when Katya was diagnosed with severe congenital heart defects and needed major surgery at six months of age. We chose to go to the Boston Children's Hospital in US for her surgery. Couldn't it have been done in this country?

It was highly complex surgery that had not been done in SA before, and the risks were much lower at Boston Children's, which had much greater experience with highly complex cases. Today I think some of our top units have much greater experience, and the calculations might well be different.

Q Was it successful?

Completely. Katya is in superb health.

Q Any other defining moments?

My time in Oxford and the opportunity it gave me to shift my career journey away from purely clinical medicine, and open up what has been for me a very rich and interesting journey.

Q Done anything crazy in your life?

I've done a few crazy, mildly risky things in my young adult years, but I'm not sure I should describe them here. It was at a time in life when we all think we are immortal.

Q Who would you invite to your dream dinner party?

I have different fantasies about who I would invite. Some guests would be the great writers I have enjoyed reading, including historians. I would love to hear their views about what history tells us about the present and the future. I would love to invite Niall Ferguson, professor of history at Harvard. He has written *The Ascent of Money*, and other interesting books on the history of finance and economics. Also the late Tony Judt (the British historian and essayist), and Bill Clinton. He is one of my greatest heroes, a brilliant politician and a Renaissance man.

Q If you could be a comic book superhero, what would your superpower be?

The power to get my children to listen to me.

Q If you could edit your life, what would you change?

To be honest, I don't think I would want to change anything at all.

Q Where is paradise?

At home with my family, with no arrangements and no deadlines.

Q Do you get there often?

Almost never.

Q What have you learned from life?

I guess life has taught me to know what's important to me, and to be honest about that to myself and to others; and also that nothing is more important than integrity.

Q What advice do you have for others?

It's important to know yourself well, and to live your life with integrity in a way that is fully consistent with your values. Being able to do that is the foundation of a life of meaning and value.

Q Any secret fears?

Like all of us, I fear violence and crime, and of course illness in my family or myself.

Q And hopes and dreams?

My dreams are to see my kids grow up healthy and successful, and living fulfilled and meaningful lives.

Q Would you like either of them to become doctors?

I genuinely don't have any specific career aspirations for them. I just want them to find careers and lives that are meaningful for them, and allow them to express themselves to the fullest.