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Linda Vahdat, MD

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Dr. Linda Vahdat calls her career in medicine “predetermined.” Growing up in a family of doctors, she was given a simple career choice by her parents: become a doctor or a lawyer. She never even considered the second option.

For Dr. Vahdat, clinical oncology was an outlet for her innate scientific curiosity. In the early 1990s, when it came time to decide on a medical specialty, she naturally chose one of the most dynamic and promising areas of oncology at the time - breast cancer.

“Oncology was exciting to me because there was so much that was unknown,” said Dr. Vahdat, who now directs the breast cancer research program at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York City. Speaking of the breast cancer field at the time, she added, “I was driven by the potential to cure women who, in the past, would have had little hope of being cured. It was incredible to meet women who were in a really bad situation and to be able to give them hope.”

“I was driven by the potential to cure women who would otherwise not be cured.” - Dr. Linda Vahdat

When Dr. Vahdat began a fellowship at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in 1990, breast cancer was one of oncology's fastest moving fields. Never one to avoid controversy, Dr. Vahdat soon became involved in promising but controversial research evaluating the use of stem cell transplantation as part of chemotherapy for advanced breast cancer. Within the next few years, the first targeted therapies offered new hope for breast cancer patients.

Dr. Vahdat also points to the breast cancer advocacy movement as a source of inspiration: “They saw how well HIV/AIDS advocates were able to advance a research agenda, and they wanted translate that to the breast cancer arena. I think they've done that very successfully.”

Today, looking back on her career so far, Dr. Vahdat says her most rewarding moments are visiting with patients, especially those that are still cancer-free after many years when the odds were that they would not be cancer free. In one recent instance, an cancer survivor who underwent a stem cell transplant for Stage 4 breast cancer 11-years ago came for a visit, and brought her granddaughter.

“It was a real trip for me,” she said. “Her care was so different than what we do today, and yet here she is, still cancer free. It's moments like those that keep you motivated and make you realize what a difference you can make in someone's life.”

Breast cancer treatment and research have changed dramatically in the years since that patient was treated, she added: “It's far superior today compared to just five, 10, 15 years ago. We understand breast cancer in a very different way now, and the kinds of clinical trials we run these days are very different.”

Dr. Vahdat credits the sequencing of the human genome in 2003 as a critical milestone that has enhanced oncologists' understanding of breast cancer and created new avenues for treating the disease. Genetic discoveries have already been translated into better treatments and improved survival for breast cancer, and more new approaches are being tested in clinical trials.

Alongside her formal training, Dr. Vahdat credits ASCO for enhancing her ability to give patients the best care possible. She became involved with the organization early on in her career, after former ASCO President Dr. Karen Antman encouraged her to join and appointed her to the Cancer Education Committee. Since then, she has volunteered throughout the organization, helping to shape several of the organization's scientific meetings, and in 2010 won an ASCO Statesman Award for 20 years of dedication and service to the Society.

ASCO's programs have also given Dr. Vahdat the chance to help cancer patients in ways that go beyond the clinic. When ASCO launched its patient website, now called [Cancer.Net](#) [1], in 2002,

the site's Editor in Chief, Diane Blum, tapped Dr. Vahdat to help develop the site's content on breast cancer.

Speaking of her work on Cancer.Net, Dr. Vahdat said, "It was really exciting to package the information we know as oncologists in a format that patients can understand. It's so important to give patients good information because there is so much bad, confusing information out there."

Looking ahead, Dr. Vahdat remains energized by the growing opportunity to provide personalized cancer care that is tailored to the unique genetics of individual patients' tumors.

"One of the most important things I've learned is not to rest on your laurels, because once you do, you're going to get far behind," she said. "So I find that I am working more than ever. But when I meet with the women we're helping, I'm happy to keep working. There are so many interesting things going on. I just want to be involved with everything. And there's a lot of work to be done."

Linda T. Vahdat, MD, is a Professor of Medicine at Weill Cornell Medical College and Director of the college's Breast Cancer Research Program. Her major research interests include strategies to understand and prevent metastases, evaluation of new therapies and approaches to controlling breast cancer. Among her extensive work volunteering on ASCO's committees, Dr. Vahdat served as co-chair of the 2010 Breast Cancer Symposium Program Committee and is a current member of the Clinical Practice Guidelines Committee and the Timely Oncology Perspectives Task Force. She has received several awards, including a 2010 ASCO Statesman Award, Cancer Care of Connecticut's Humanitarian Award, and a "Physician of the Year" award from Cancer Care.

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Links

[1] <http://www.cancer.net>