Nancy Davidson, MD [1]

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Dr. Nancy Davidson has seen many things change over the course of her 25-year career as a breast cancer researcher and physician. But by far the biggest change she has seen is the shift to a more ?patient-centered focus? in cancer care.

?Over my career, our field has become dramatically more patient-centered,? said Dr. Davidson, one of the world's leading breast cancer specialists and director of the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute. ?The patient is our focal point - as cancer doctors, we're wrapped around the patient, trying to help them make the best possible decisions.?

Dr. Davidson believes it's possible to be much more patient-focused today because of the significant advances that have been achieved in cancer care. Patients and physicians have better information to guide their decisions, and more options for treating their cancer - in many cases with fewer complications.

?To take breast cancer as just one example, we've seen a huge refinement in how we do surgery,? Dr. Davidson said, noting that while full breast removal was once standard treatment, today many tumors can be removed without such invasive procedures. ?We've demonstrated unequivocally that smaller surgeries are often as effective as larger surgeries. We've been able to refine and minimize our surgical techniques, and patients have benefitted.?

Similar gains have been made against many other cancer types, she said. ?For years and years there was exactly one colon cancer drug. Today, there's a whole arsenal of treatments to choose from.?

All of this adds up to increased attention to survivorship and quality of life for patients. ?Survivorship is something we didn't used to be able to think about much. But now that treatments have improved, we get to think about survivorship a lot,? Dr. Davidson said.

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Dr. Davidson first got involved in breast cancer through a series of coincidences, starting with a part-time college job in a cancer research lab that she found through a friend. This led to another job with an up-and-coming breast cancer researcher at the National Cancer Institute. These experiences convinced her that the field was her ?north star.? In 1986, while serving as a breast cancer specialist at Johns Hopkins University, she received an ASCO Young Investigator Award, which she credits with helping launch her career.

The award supported research on the role of a protein known as v-erbB in breast cancer. ?While that research went absolutely nowhere in my lab,? she said with a laugh, ?I'm very happy to report that it went a long way in other people's labs.? The protein is part of a family of proteins that are now targeted with anti-cancer drugs like Herceptin.

Over the past 25 years, Dr. Davidson has gone on to play a pivotal role in major breast cancer treatment advances. She has published key findings on the role of hormones, particularly estrogen, on gene expression and cell growth in breast cancer. In 2007-2008, she served as ASCO's president, a role she says helped her ?think more broadly about the totality of cancer, and how we need to approach it going forward.?

For her contributions to breast cancer research and care, Dr. Davidson was presented with the 2010 Gianni Bonadonna Breast Cancer Award. Dr. Davidson said she was honored to receive the award, not just because it recognizes her research, but also because it recognizes the importance of mentoring the next generation of oncologists.

?I'd like to hope that I've given back to younger people in our field in the way that so many have given to me,? she said.

When she mentors younger researchers and physicians - including her own daughter, who recently entered medical school - Dr. Davidson asks them ?to keep in mind our overarching goal, which is to do the best thing by our patients. I ask people to keep in mind that good science and good medicine are completely linked.?

Dr. Davidson said working with patients means building a long-term relationship, with both ups and downs. Reflecting on an email she received recently from a patient she cared for 17 years ago, Dr. Davidson said: ?I'm delighted to think that someone who was treated so long ago is out and around and able to send me an email to ask a question. But unfortunately she got back in touch because she's had a recurrence of cancer, and I'm really sad that she still has to be in contact with an oncologist.?

Looking to the future of patient-centered cancer care, Dr. Davidson says this is a time ?of both great opportunity and great challenge.?

?It's clear that cancer remains a huge health problem - in the United States as well as globally,? she said. ?But we've learned so much about cancer, and we're poised to take advantage of that in an even more meaningful way in the future than we have in the past.?

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Nancy E. Davidson, MD currently serves as Director of the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute and UPMC Cancer Centers. She has published key findings on the role of hormones, particularly estrogen, on gene expression and cell growth in breast cancer, and has also guided several important national clinical trials of potential new therapies, including chemoendocrine therapy for premenopausal breast cancer and antiangiogenesis therapy for advanced disease. Dr. Davidson was president of ASCO from 2007 to 2008 and has served as a member of the scientific advisory boards of numerous foundations. She has received several awards from ASCO, including the 2010 Gianni Bonadonna Breast Cancer Award, The ASCO Cancer Foundation Young Investigator Award, and the American Cancer Society Clinical Oncology Career Development Award.

Last Updated: February 02, 2011

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