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William Gradishar, MD

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Whenever William Gradishar, MD, meets a new patient with breast cancer, it's hard not to reflect on how far the field has advanced since he began practicing oncology. "A growing number of women with breast cancer now do very well on treatment, so I'm often struck by how vastly different their outcomes would have been just 20 years ago," said Dr. Gradishar, the Betsy Bramsen Professor of Breast Oncology at the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago. "With today's therapies, we're giving more patients back their lives - and their quality of life - and hopefully for a long time."

Dr. Gradishar points to treatment advances that are prolonging the lives of thousands of women with breast cancer every year, and to promising new research that could lead to earlier detection and more personalized care in the near future.

The promise of cancer science is what first attracted Dr. Gradishar to oncology in the 1980s, when he was a resident at the now-shuttered Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago. "There was so much we didn't yet know about cancer, and I found that very intriguing from a scientific point of view," he explained. "The less you know, the more there is to learn. Even today, I'm able to do something different every day and, at the same time, to help my patients live better, longer lives."

And Dr. Gradishar has never been a stranger to taking on new challenges in order to help

patients in need, even those half-way around the world. In fact, after finishing his residency in 1980s, he joined an international medical corps of doctors on the border of Afghanistan, which was at war with the Soviet Union at the time. Together with his colleagues, Dr. Gradishar trained Afghans to be medics and worked with them to set up local clinics in remote parts of the country where access to medical care was severely limited.

Over time, the thrills of his career have often been exceeded by the inspiration Dr. Gradishar draws from his patients. "Some were young women who had families, and I thought about what their husbands and children would have to go through. Others made an impact because they were the same age as I was. Many have done very well and are long-term survivors. But the patients who didn't do well have often left the biggest impressions - I will always remember their grace and dignity in dealing with such a serious illness."

He says these experiences have fueled his drive to advance patient care through his own research on new therapies for breast cancer. He also enjoys training new doctors and is gratified to see them establishing their own practices and serving patients around the country.

Yet like all oncologists, he recognizes that major challenges remain: "Breast cancer is still the second leading cause of cancer death among women. It's important that we find new, more effective therapies to bring the numbers down." As a past-Chair of ASCO's Communications Committee, he has played a key role in spreading the word about recent cancer advances, and about the need for continued research into new cures.

To accelerate the pace of progress, one top priority is to increase patients' participation in clinical trials, which serve as the vital link between scientific discoveries and new therapies for patients. In his own work, Dr. Gradishar routinely encourages his patients to inquire about clinical trials. "Clinical trials give patients access to promising new therapies and treatment strategies, while offering them the opportunity to help improve care for future patients," he said. "We now have multiple drugs that aim to work in new, smarter ways, with the potential to help patients - provided their effectiveness can be studied in clinical trials."

He is also a strong advocate for the oncology profession and encourages young physicians to enter the field. The need is greater than ever: ASCO projects a shortfall of oncologists by the year 2020, as the population ages and more people develop cancer.

"There is a great need for young oncologists to care for patients, and to bring fresh, cutting-edge research ideas to the table," he said. "The great thing about this career is that we're helping people every day, and the pace of science is so fast that the job will be just as interesting 20 years from now as it is today."

William Gradishar, MD, is the recipient of the 2008 ASCO Statesman Award for his continued and tireless dedication to the American Society of Clinical Oncology. He is currently Betsy Bramsen Professorship of Breast Oncology and Professor in Medicine-Hematology/Oncology at

Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago. His research focuses on the development of novel therapeutics for the treatment of breast cancer.

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