

[Home](#) People



In this photo: Ashley Vavra, MD

## "It Often Boils Down to Listening"

Learn why Ashley Vavra, MD, was honored with a Compassionate Care Award for her dedication to patients.

---

Throughout college and medical school, Ashley Vavra, MD, took time out of her busy schedule to volunteer at health clinics for the homeless. "I have always had an interest in providing care to the underserved," she says.

Dr. Vavra, a resident in general surgery, remembers how patients who were homeless tended to have an overwhelming number of problems. "You would often feel helpless," Dr. Vavra says. "So you figure out one or two things you can do to make their day better."

She has taken a similar approach in caring for patients with cancer through the Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center of Northwestern University at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. "You can't change the fact that they have a cancer diagnosis," she says. "But you can find a way to help them deal with that news, whether it's for the next few hours or the next few days, whatever their immediate needs are."

Her attention to patient needs and the understanding she brings to their concerns are among the qualities that led to Dr. Vavra being named one of three winners of Northwestern Memorial's Compassionate Care Awards for 2012.

In a letter nominating Dr. Vavra for the award, surgical oncologist Anne Marie Boller, MD, said Dr. Vavra "has demonstrated an incredible ability to manage complex patient care issues and simultaneously infuse a level of compassion and empathy through her care that is unsurpassed."

During her residency, Dr. Vavra had the opportunity to work with many surgical oncologists. Dr. Boller said that Dr. Vavra also has served as an inspiration for medical students, residents and for members of the medical staff. "Her inherent compassion and care infused patients, their families and the surgery team with a new idea of what it is to be a physician, a surgeon and a human being," Dr. Boller said.

Dr. Vavra says that she knew she wanted to be a physician when she was in high school. She chose to specialize in surgery because she liked the pace and variety. "I love being in the operating room and I love the idea of being able to fix things, though we aren't always able to fix them," she says.

She also learned that "compassionate care" is not always about fixing things. "It often boils down to listening," she says. "A lot of times if people are going through difficult situations, they don't necessarily want you to fix the problem, they just want you to acknowledge it."

The work requires Dr. Vavra to draw from her own inner strength. "Caring for patients in these most stressful kinds of situations can be both challenging and rewarding," she says. "Physicians obviously are just as prone to feeling angry

or frustrated or upset about things as anyone else. And you can certainly be affected by other people's feelings. The anxiety that your patients and their families feel may be difficult not to absorb. Trying to remain calm in those situations is really challenging.

"In some ways, it all comes down to the fundamental ways you're taught to act with people in kindergarten," she says. "You learn how to treat people, how to respond to people, how to communicate with people effectively."

Anne Marie Boller, MD is surgical oncologist on the medical staff at Northwestern Memorial and an assistant professor in Surgery-Surgical Oncology at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine.

Each year, Compassionate Care Awards are presented to individuals who exemplify and serve as role models for their humanistic and compassionate care for oncology patients. The Woman's Board of Northwestern Memorial Hospital created the award in 1991. Others recognized this year are Lisa Marshall, RN, MS, AOCN, APN, an advanced practice nurse in Hematology/Oncology's GI clinical trial and oncology research program; and Michael Hoffman, MD, a hospitalist specializing in oncology. Look for a profile of Marshall in coming weeks.