

[Home](#) People



In this photo: John Galvin, MD

Understanding His Patients' Lives

Learn why John Galvin, MD, was honored with a Compassionate Care Award for his dedication to patients.

When discussing treatment options with cancer patients, John Galvin, MD, makes sure they understand that their lives, and the lives of their loved ones, will change in ways they may not have expected.

"My treatment decision is going to affect their children, their spouses, it's going to affect a lot of other people," says Galvin, a fellow in the Hematopoietic Stem Cell Transplant program provided through Northwestern Memorial Hospital and the Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center of Northwestern University. "So you have to be thinking that I'm not just talking to a patient, I'm talking to all sides of this person's life."

But Galvin doesn't just talk to his patients, he listens.

"I think the thing I picked up from my mentors is how well they listen. From that listening, they know how to continue the conversation," Galvin says. "There's that other aspect of being a doctor which you can only learn by watching other people handle it in terms of social skills and learning how to help people emotionally through their disease."

Galvin has learned well. For his dedication and approach to patient care, he was honored this year as one of three winners of the Lurie Cancer Center's Compassionate Care Awards for 2013.

Galvin specializes in treating very sick patients, and stem cell transplants are not offered to every one. In fact, a committee meets to discuss whether a patient is a good candidate. "They will have to see us every week, they will have to take a lot of medication," Galvin says. "We know their life is about to fundamentally change. We have to know they are going to be compliant."

In addition, Galvin, his colleagues and his patients must take into account the possible side effects and the burdens that come with them

"As a physician you want to cure everybody," Galvin says. "There is an internal conflict that all physicians have. You hold a treatment that you know will cure the disease. But you have to be honest with yourself and ask if this is going to give them a terrible quality of life? And so it helps if you share in the decision making."

It's those debilitating side effects that prompted Galvin to also take on the role as a researcher, investigating the symptoms that burden patients receiving stem cell transplant and the resultant graft versus host disease. He is working under Judith A Paice, PhD/RN, a research professor in Medicine Hematology/Oncology at Northwestern Feinberg School of Medicine.

“John has impressed me with his extraordinarily empathic approach to patients undergoing this complex treatment,” Paice wrote in her letter recommending Galvin for his award. “John has been thoughtful in his approach to these patients and to conducting this research. The results of this study will provide extremely valuable information as we learn to best manage the long term complications of this essential therapy.”

Galvin has seen how these treatments often come at a tremendous cost. “You might save their lives in the sense that they haven’t died, but the quality of their life now is maybe they cannot provide for their family, cook their own meals or need assistance to live,” he says. “It’s a huge tradeoff.”

Paice says Galvin is a true caregiver. “John provides compassionate and empathic care in his role as fellow,” she wrote. “Furthermore, he is a person concerned about the health well-being of people in Chicago and globally.”

Paice is referring to Galvin’s commitment outside of his work to helping young people. Galvin founded and directs a not for profit called Early Exposures Inc., in Chicago. It’s an art education intervention designed for at risk children enrolled in Chicago Youth Programs. Through the use of photography, children develop creativity and independent learning.

Galvin, who also holds a master’s degree in public health, developed the program while in medical school. “Everything we do in our lives is related to our health, whether it’s how we access education, and it’s well known that there’s a direct correlation between education and health,” he says. “As a physician I feel it’s might job to know this, and to participate. It would be easy and convenient to ignore this. It was great to start my medical career with this awareness.”

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 Vicki Mauer, RN, and Julian Schink, MD. Watch for stories on the other winners in upcoming weeks in Connections online.