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Scientist-doctor has vision behind cancer research center

Clarice Keating
Staff Writer

In May 2007, after being diagnosed with stage-four melanoma, Karen Anderson was advised to go home and spend quality time with her family and prepare for death. But Anderson, 47, wasn't quite ready to give up yet.

Instead, the Eugene resident had her doctor help put her in touch with Dr. Walter Urba, medical director of the Providence Cancer Center. He agreed to take Anderson on as one of the patients he works with in between his many other responsibilities in developing and running the world-class cancer research program.

Since then, Anderson has undergone surgeries, three clinical trials and a couple of hospital stays as doctors discovered tumors in areas of her body that include her heart, brain, liver, breasts and intestines.

"Dr. Urba has been amazing," she said. "He has saved my life – several times over. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for his work."

Recruited in 1993, Dr. Urba works with scientists and clinicians to develop immunotherapy as a means to fight cancer.

Before he came to Providence, Urba was head of the Biological Response Modifier Program for the National Cancer Institute. He brought with him a number of cancer researchers to help set up the lab.

"We had excellent and very active treatment protocols in chemotherapy, surgery, and radiation therapy, but no one in the area had a fully established immunotherapy program," said Russ Danielson, former chief executive for the Oregon region of Providence Health & Services. "This treatment method uses your own body's immune system to fight the cancer, and it requires special expertise and equipment at the cell biology level."

Robert Franz and Earle Chiles were two of the original benefactors who made the recruitment possible.

Today, the research center collaborates regularly with physicians interested in clinical research. It's funded by private donors, foundations and federal agencies, including a recent boost of \$2.8 million from the NCI that is intended to help improve care to underserved populations.

Urba grew up in New Jersey, where he went to high school and college. Then he earned a doctorate in immunology from UCLA. He liked working in the science lab, but found the results to be a delayed gratification.

"I wanted to have that patient part of my work," he said. "You can really see and feel what you've contributed for them."

So he enrolled in the medical school at the University of Miami, graduating in 1981.

Around that time, his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. He moved his family closer to home because he wanted his two children to be closer to his grandmother. The diagnosis also sparked his interest in medical oncology.

Originally Urba had wanted to specialize in transplant work, but his mother's illness had an impact. After undergoing chemotherapy and surgery, Urba's mother lived almost 30 years after her original diagnosis.

In 1993, Danielson contacted Urba and convinced him to move to Oregon to build the research center, an unusual move, as traditionally research is carried out in a university setting.

Instead of coming into a program that had been existence for years, Danielson was presenting Urba with an opportunity to do whatever he wanted, limited only by his own creativity, he said.

"Research is not an inexpensive passion to pursue, but [Danielson] understood what it would take," Urba said.

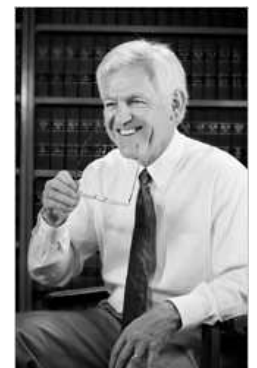
At that time, there were a handful of scientists who were entertaining the idea that the immune system could be marshaled to fight cancer. With his science background, Urba expand exploration in this area.

These days, Urba is busy. In his position, he sees patients, is a member of a transplant team, carries out administrative duties,



Catholic Sentinel photo by Clarice Keating
Dr. Walter Urba, back right, oversees lab work at Providence Cancer Center.

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meets with young scientists to discuss research and to help with grants and papers, and works with foundations and members of the community to garner support for the center. He also serves on a national NCI board that meets four times a year to review the latest scientific discoveries in cancer research and is the principal investigator on clinical trials.

Today, patients travel to Providence from all over Oregon, Washington, Northern California and New Mexico, even as far away as Sri Lanka, to get the first shot at new drugs and experimental treatments that were formerly only available at the Mayo Clinic or NCI.

“Under [Urba’s] leadership, today Providence has a very active immunotherapy program and a large research enterprise,” said Danielson. This year, the center was selected by the National Cancer Institute as a Community Cancer Center – one of only 30 in the country.

“Those accomplishments are a direct reflection on [Urba’s] vision, his dedication to our ministry and his compassion for cancer patients and their families,” Danielson said.

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The advertisement is a horizontal banner. On the left is the logo for The Madeleine School, featuring a stylized 'M' with two crosses above it and the text 'THE MADELEINE SCHOOL' below. To the right of the logo is a blue background with white text: '98 Years of Faith in Education', 'Schedule a Tour Today!', '503-288-9197', '3240 NE 23rd Ave. • Portland, OR 97212', and 'www.themadeleine.edu'. On the far right is a black and white photograph of a football team from 1949, with the text 'C.Y.O. FOOTBALL A CHAMPS 1949' above them.

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