

Making a difference to many

Georgina V. Long is co-medical director of Melanoma Institute Australia and Chair of Melanoma Medical Oncology and Translational Research. She is the first woman president of the Society for Melanoma Research.

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I was one of six children to adventurous and curious parents. We lived in various countries around the globe, including Italy and the US, and our way of doing things was always a little unconventional. When we went on holidays, we went camping in famous European cities and slept in 'sleeping sheets' that my mother had sewn from scraps of material with kid-friendly prints. From my father, I learned to 'work hard and play hard.' A family joke was that a 30-minute bushwalk with my parents could take upwards of 2 hours, given that we had to examine every native plant along the track. My father, who was an anesthesiologist, and my mother, who taught and researched public health, never pressured us to follow them in their medical careers. But my mother would often talk about the joys of impacting people's lives with epidemiological research and public health policies. Her mantra of 'making a difference to many' really struck a chord with me.

I grew up reading the medical books my parents owned. This might be why after completing a PhD in chemistry (supervised by a powerhouse of a mentor, Margaret Harding) and a Fulbright postdoctoral fellowship with Reza Ghadiri at The Scripps Research Institute in California, I felt that my chemistry PhD could be supplemented with in-depth medical knowledge. So I went to medical school, which I completed in 2000.

A sliding doors moment came a few years later when I had a chance meeting with the Australian pathologist Richard Scolyer. I had just had my third baby and completed my oncology training, and I was considering which area of cancer to specialize in. Richard cycled past my backyard in Sydney and stopped to chat. "You're crazy if you don't get into melanoma," he said. He explained that we Australians have one of the highest incidences of the disease in the world, with no effective drug therapies. Becoming a melanoma specialist would therefore be a huge opportunity to effect change.



Credit: Melanoma Institute Australia

Melanoma and its risks were not new to me. My father would warn us of the risk of damage from ultraviolet rays and would wear long-sleeved shirts and wide-brimmed hats outdoors at a time when sunburns weren't thought of as seriously as they are today. Later, in medical school, I had researched melanoma of the head and neck. So when Richard suggested melanoma as a specialization, I think a part of me was already ready for it.

I loved studying cancer. There were many opportunities to perform research and to make a difference in melanoma. My first four years as a medical oncologist and translational researcher were self-funded by grants I wrote. At the time, despite having three children, the oldest of whom was 4, I was not allowed to take the grant part-time. This was challenging, as I had to juggle schedules at home, the clinic and the research lab.

Fast-forward more than a decade, and Scolyer and I are now co-medical directors of Melanoma Institute Australia. We are working towards what was once

unthinkable—zero deaths from melanoma. My work now focuses on targeted and immune therapies in melanoma, which have significantly improved the survival of patients with advanced melanoma and have even cured some. When I entered the melanoma field, more than 90% of patients with advanced melanoma did not live longer than three years after diagnosis. Now, more than 50% of patients make it past three years.

However, many challenges remain. Determining specific mechanisms of resistance, which is a growing problem, is a current research focus in our laboratory. We're also testing different ways to administer drugs. Trials in patients with stage III cancers suggest immunotherapy works better before surgery than after, and we think that this is because the presence of the tumor helps elicit a stronger antitumor response from the immune system.

Reflecting on my career path brings to mind so many influences, both people and experiences, that were critical to my career. I am a proud mum to three teenage daughters and have achieved all these things with the support of my free-thinking and visionary husband Greg, who predicted that there'd be a huge wave in melanoma research and that I had to catch it. With the continued support of my family and colleagues, I look forward to achieving zero deaths from melanoma in my lifetime and to making a difference to many. □

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