



CANCER WARRIOR

Dr. Walter Urba

W Walter Urba, M.D., Ph.D., leads the fight at the Robert W. Franz Cancer Research Center, Earle A. Chiles Research Institute and has dedicated his professional life to combating cancer.

Dr. Urba was at UCLA pursuing his Ph.D. when he came to a realization. "I became impatient with how slowly basic research progressed and questioned what I was really contributing," Dr. Urba recalls. "I knew I had to do something directly with patients; I had to see how my scientific research would really benefit patients." That's when the scientist decided to become a physician, too.

Dr. Urba was finishing medical school in 1980 when his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. "My concerns were the same as any son's," he says. "I was worried about losing my mother; about what she would have to go through, about my dad and brothers and sisters. We had a young daughter and a newborn son, and I thought about whether they would know their grandma."

Dr. Urba chose a residency program at Morristown Memorial Hospital near his parents' New Jersey home. Because of his mother's diagnosis and treatment, he had a heightened awareness of cancer patients and their problems during his training. He found that the oncologists he worked with were the best role models for him. "Oncology appealed to me because I would get to use everything I knew about medicine in my work."

With his Ph.D. and M.D. in hand, Dr. Urba began an oncology fellowship at the National Cancer Institute (NCI) in Bethesda, Maryland. Following the completion of his fellowship, he was able to blend his expertise in immunology and oncology as he

worked at the Biological Response Modifier Program of the NCI.

"Since that time, I have been working with others to develop a fourth modality to treat cancer – something in addition to surgery, radiation and chemotherapy," he says. "We are clearly going to be treating cancer in a different way in the coming decade. Treatment will be based on the biology of the cancer cell and what we understand about how we can specifically inhibit or eliminate malignant cells."

Dr. Urba believes that immunotherapy should reduce the collateral damage that can occur with existing treatments.

"There is too little specificity to our current strategies, particularly chemotherapy," says Dr. Urba. "The immune system is very specific; it has a very effective way of targeting abnormal cells and leaving normal cells alone. Approaching tumors biologically and scientifically, based on what we know is wrong with the tumor cells – then eradicating them or fixing the problem – is the treatment of the future."

Dr. Urba believes the personal experience of his mother's battle with cancer makes him a better oncologist. "I certainly have first-hand experience with how anxious patients are when scans or tumor markers are done to measure their response to treatments. I see how the disease affects the whole family. I see how important clear communication is. It certainly makes me even more driven in my research."

Dr. Urba knows that his mother is alive today because of early breast cancer research. She serves as a reminder to him of how far cancer research has come, and how far it has yet to go. His mother's cancer recurred a few years ago.

"I am reminded that we have not solved all the problems," says Dr. Urba. "As long as people still die prematurely from cancer, the research must go on."

WALTER URBA, M.D., PH.D., DISPLAYS A MODEL OF THE NEW CANCER PAVILION, OPENING IN 2007 ON THE PROVIDENCE PORTLAND MEDICAL CENTER CAMPUS.