

# Medical Oncology

An Interview with Wasif M. Saif, M.D.,  
Deputy Physician-in-Chief, Northwell Health Cancer Institute

**EDITORS' NOTE** Dr. Wasif Saif is an internationally known clinical and translational researcher in the field of gastrointestinal cancers. He has been widely published on the molecular biology, early detection and treatment of gastrointestinal malignancies. Dr. Saif has both clinical and research interests in the treatment of GI cancers (liver, pancreas, biliary, colon, rectum, carcinoma, GIST, stomach, esophagus, anal). In addition, he specializes in new drug development and phase I clinical trials for patients with advanced carcinoma and other GI tumors. He is a Professor at both the Donald and Barbara Zucker School of Medicine at Hofstra/Northwell and The Feinstein Institutes for Medical Research. He is responsible for overseeing the medical oncology services and research projects for all Cancer Institute locations. Before joining Northwell, he was the Director of the GI Oncology Program and Program Leader of Experimental Therapeutics at Tufts Medical Center. Previously, he served in leadership positions at Yale, Columbia and the University of Alabama at Birmingham. He received his medical training at King Edward Medical College, Lahore, Pakistan.



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doctor driven because it listens to the patients and doctors and allows us to challenge existing standards for the betterment of our patients.

I have access directly to the dean of the medical school and the dean of research, as well as to Michael Dowling, the CEO. They are willing to talk to me anytime. This is unique because at many other places there is such a high level of bureaucracy with many layers, making it a challenge to bring about change in the culture of an institution.

**Will you provide an overview of medical oncology and some of the advances taking place in this area?**

Medical oncology is a very interesting and dynamic field. I am making sure my team members have a disease-specific focus. We are creating disease-specific groups throughout the health system. I ask people to concentrate on specific tumor types or pathways and incorporate them into those disease-specific, multi-disciplinary groups.

accelerate the development of such agents and provide treatment options to refractory tumor types.

**What are the keys to driving real impact in the treatment of cancer?**

Every cancer type has become very sub-specialized and needs to have a team looking at the patient from a physiological, physical, mental, and biological component. That means a pathologist, radiologist, nutritionist, social worker, medical oncologist, surgical oncologist and others need to work together to provide the best treatment in what we call tailored therapy.

The second key is providing precision oncology. Precision oncology is based on the notion that we are able to identify a particular gene. That gene will help us give the right drug to the patient.

Patients are living longer and living longer is a huge thing. I always go back to the old story I heard as a kid when Alexander the Great was dying, he announced that anybody who would give him one extra day of life would be given all of his treasures. Nobody was able to give him one extra day of life.

**You have been a part of a number of leading healthcare institutions. What excited you about the opportunity to join Northwell Health?**

I always want to do more and offer more to the world. I think that's where Northwell fits in because I realized if I came to an institution that was so large, I could have an influence over a greater population. For me, it is not about the name or fame. It's about the impact I can cast on my patients and on the new generation of doctors and nurses. I think that's really what I was looking for. Tufts is a great place with a great name, but I needed to do more. Northwell offers that opportunity.

**Is the emphasis Northwell has placed on leading in cancer research and treatment well understood?**

I think one thing that needs to be understood is that the hospitals that comprise Northwell have been serving a large patient population for a long time. I believe that among all the institutions I have worked for, this is one of the top-notch places. It is really patient and

Every cancer type has become very sub-specialized and needs to have a team looking at the patient from a physiological, physical, mental, and biological component.

At the same time, medical research is an extremely important part of medical oncology and hematology. Unfortunately, all the agents we are using today are not curing a majority of the patients. We need to learn more about the characteristics of individual cancers. This is the era of personalized medicine and precision oncology. We need to learn more about the patient, and we need to explore and develop new anti-cancer drugs. This is where clinical trials become an important part of the path to

I think that's something we need to understand. We all are going to die. It's not as if only cancer patients are dying. But preventing them from suffering is very important. And sometimes, living a few extra days or weeks for a patient is very important because their daughter may be getting married or their grandson may be graduating. Every day is important in life. Nobody can tell you more about that importance than a person who is given a diagnosis of cancer. ●