

Driven by Passion, Directed by Data

Breast and ovarian researcher Kala Visvanathan, MD, MHS, wants to prevent cancer in every patient

"To be successful in preventing cancer," says Dr. Kala Visvanathan, "we need to understand what is happening in the real world."

Why, for example, are there some patients who have not had germline testing to determine if they are a BRCA1/BRAC2 carrier, even though they fit the criteria for testing?

The test, which has been available for 15 years, indicates the likelihood for developing ovarian, breast, and other types of cancer. Still, not all patients are aware the test exists, have access to the testing, or feel comfortable taking advantage of it.

"We found the disparity to be worse among individuals of low socioeconomic status, even if they have insurance," explains Dr. Visvanathan. "This group of individuals and their families could benefit enormously from prevention given the rising costs of treatment."

With the help of donor-supported grants, including a 2005 Conquer Cancer Career Development Award (CDA), Dr. Visvanathan has spent her career conducting both observational studies and clinical trials focused on preventing cancer and keeping it from reoccurring.

"To reduce the risk of cancer in women and men, we must remove any barriers so that patients and providers not only have access

to the best care, but also understand the benefits of prevention."

Dr. Visvanathan evaluates real world information to uncover real world solutions.

"I believe strongly that technological advances enabling us to merge large databases from multiple sources that have information on all types of individuals can be used to better understand the source of the disparities and then identify effective solutions to address them," says Dr. Visvanathan.

Dr. Visvanathan and her team continue to explore new avenues in research and look to the next generation of scientists to help uncover new information.

"Women researchers are an important part of the solution to improving cancer outcomes."



Dr. Visvanathan is a breast medical oncologist and translational epidemiologist who directs the Clinical Cancer Genetics and Prevention Service at Johns Hopkins Sidney Kimmel Cancer Center in Baltimore, Md.

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Loving What You Do and Keeping Love Alive

Dr. Debra Patt on modern marriage and the working woman

What are the challenges you have faced as a woman who conquers cancer?

Every professional woman faces some unique challenges. These challenges can be as innocent as trying to prioritize the burdens and privileges of your personal and professional life during a critical time of professional development. Most women professionals I know manage other challenges, too, like inappropriate sexual advances, diminished compensation in comparison to their male counterparts, and corporate bullying. Some challenges are as pervasive as lack of maternity leave policies or having maternity leave policies that penalize women in the path to partnership or cause financial penalties. More often, women face criticism for speaking up and showing initiative, traits that are often praised in their male counterparts. *While the professional environment is far better than it used to be, we still have a long way to go to have a more egalitarian work environment based on meritocracy that fosters diversity of representation.*

How do you find a life/work balance?

My husband and I met in medical school over our cadaver, Doris. I have been fortunate to have a great partner that is a reliable sounding board for how to make progress in healthcare and how to approach the adventure of parenting our three amazing children -- 16, 13, and 10. We try to see the challenges before us. We both have leadership roles in our practices that frequently have similar structures and considerations. It is still a brave frontier, and we have a long way still to travel.

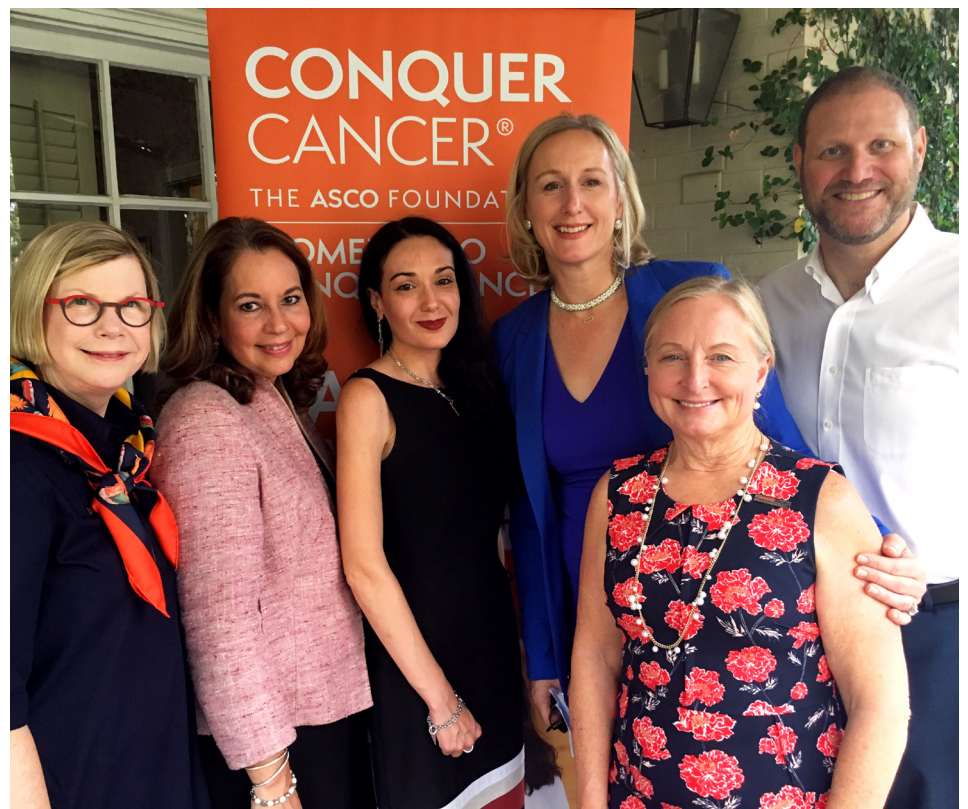
What motivates your work?

My career focuses on the advancement of health policy to care for cancer patients, bringing clinical cancer informatics to the forefront of advancements in care delivery and advancing the care of breast cancer patients. I am systems oriented,

so the interconnection of these disciplines seems natural to me. I see how good policy translates into great cancer care. Focusing on breast cancer research remains important to accelerate scientific discovery and provide excellent care to patients. From a clinical perspective, this has been about developing long term relationships with women and by helping them navigate this challenging part of their life, helping them survive and thrive.

Why do you support the WWCC?

I hope by supporting professional development of women we can have more women join us on the journey of continuous progress in healthcare. I think of them [research grants] like micro loans to women in underdeveloped countries: the investment gets them started on a path of cancer research discovery.



Dr. Debra Patt (second from right) and her husband, Dr. Hanoch Patt, (far right) welcome (left to right) WWCC Advisory Group Chair and Conquer Cancer Board Member Dr. Sandra M. Swain, event co-host Dr. Gladys Rodriguez, event speaker and Conquer Cancer researcher Dr. Tina Cascone, and ASCO Board Member Dr. Linda Bosserman (front) to a 2018 WWCC fundraiser in Austin, Texas.