At the National Cancer Institute, Thomas J. Walsh, M.D., '74 dedicates his life to preventing infectious diseases.

Thomas J. Walsh, M.D. '74 is a physician with a mission from the heart. Whether caring for seriously ill patients, immersed in clinical and laboratory research, or mentoring the next generation of physicians-scientists, Dr. Walsh is deeply devoted to improving the lives of the public that he serves.

Dr. Walsh’s interest in the medical field was initially inspired by the dedicated physicians who cared for his mother who died of cancer when he was only eight years old. His interest in a medical career was later sparked when he had the opportunity to participate in health-related cooperative programs with nearby colleges and university medical centers. Exposure to physicians involved in both scientific research and clinical practice helped him to define his future work. “I saw the potential to pursue a career as a physician and scientist. I could care for patients while also being to to them the best advances in biomedical research,” he says.

Dr. Walsh’s decision to attend Assumption College reflected serious deliberation. The close one-on-one interaction with faculty, the excellence in sciences with an outstanding liberal arts foundation, and the generous financial assistance package, easing the fiscal burden of pursuing higher education, were compelling reasons for his choice. Dr. Walsh points out that a first foundation in the humanities is critical for a meaningful understanding of science, medicine, and public health.

After four years at Assumption, Dr. Walsh earned his undergraduate degree in biology with a minor in chemistry. “It was fortunate to have received instruction and inspiration from outstanding faculty who enthusiastically encouraged a love of learning, critical thinking, and approaches to problem solving,” he says. He adds that Assumption was “a pivotal in laying an intellectual, humanitarian, and moral foundation” for his future endeavors.

He matriculated to Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, where he began to focus on dual specialties of infectious diseases and oncology. He learned directly from his early clinical experience that patients with cancer benefited immensely from comprehensive supportive care, especially in treatment and prevention of infections occurring during their therapy. In 1978, he graduated from Johns Hopkins and entered a decade of post-doctoral training in clinical practice and laboratory-based investigation, leading to triple-board certification in medicine, infectious diseases, and oncology. His initial laboratory training included pharmacology, experimental microbiology, and immunology, later to be expanded into molecular biology.

Upon completing his training at the University of Maryland in Baltimore, Dr. Walsh continued his post-doctoral work at the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Md. He developed a combined clinical and laboratory research unit at the NCI, dedicated to the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of life-threatening infectious diseases in children and adults with cancer, bone marrow transplantation and other immunodeficiencies. He notes that only a few programs such as this exist across the country. Dr. Walsh credits the many talented people with whom he works for the success achieved in this area.

The outstanding talent of the NCI and NIH fosters the best of translational research where we can advance new therapies from the laboratory to patient care.

“it is through one’s teaching that one may be especially able to positively impact upon the next generation of physicians.”

“We have helped to develop from bench to bedside major new treatments for life-threatening infectious diseases. The success of our clinical trials has been possible through the excellent collaborative work our consortium and multi-member national and international study groups.”

Dr. Walsh’s expertise in the areas of infectious diseases and oncology provides a dual benefit when it comes to treating patients. “One can understand the risk factors for individual patients for developing infections and develop a strategy to help prevent or treat these infections,” he says. In addition to caring for patients at the NCI, Dr. Walsh gives unstintingly of his time to help in caring for children and adults worldwide with life-threatening infections, sometimes traveling at his own expense to a patient's bedside at a hospital in another state. “Dr. Walsh commented that 10 or 15 years ago, these same patients would not have survived. We were not for the advances in infectious diseases supportive care. He notes that among the most gratifying rewards of his clinical and laboratory research "is to know that a child or adult has lived longer or survived a devastating infection through our clinical care and translational research." He cherishes the cards from children or their parents, thanking him for his compassionate care and making a special milestone, or achieving a graduation that may not otherwise have been possible.

Currently preparing a major clinical trial, Dr. Walsh intends to study combination antibiotic treatment for serious infections. He is also exploring new pharmacological agents for treatment of resistant organisms and is investigating new ways to measure and control how the immune system responds. “It is important to understand the immune system's response in defending our patients against these dangerous organisms and to use this information to develop future strategies of diagnosis and treatment,” he says.

The author or co-author of more than 500 scientific publications, Dr. Walsh cautions, "...there is so much more to do." Although challenged with the emergence of resistant organisms and new forms of immunosuppression, he observes "we are blessed with the opportunity to bring extraordinary new advances in science to our patients’ bedside.”

These successes, however, come with a price in time and dedication. Well-known for his long workdays and tenacious dedication to clinical care, laboratory investigation, and clinical research, Dr. Walsh routine workweek is 80 to 100 hours. Having kept this pace for years, he observes that “Our patients do not have time on their side; however, we do have the time and they need our help now.”

Dr. Walsh also devoted in disasters and public health emergencies. On September 11, 2001, Dr. Walsh provided medical care to the victims and first responders. His visit to New York for a science meeting was cut short when the terrorist-controlled planes hit the World Trade Center towers. He and his colleague quickly headed for a New York City medical center where they served in emergency outpatient triage duties. As a captain in the U.S. Public Health Service (PHS), Dr. Walsh volunteered for deployment two weeks later in assisting in the assessment and treatment of the terrorist. He and his colleagues also performed as the first responders following the anthrax attack on

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