

Two disciplines, one goal

Retired after a successful career in pharma, Elliott Sigal, MD'81, PhD, wants to help researchers take cancer immunotherapy 'to the next level'

BY CLAIRE ZULKEY

“Don’t you work at the hospital?” Elliott Sigal asked the young woman in front of him in the cafeteria line. He had seen Ruth Leff at work and around the University of Chicago’s International House, where they both lived. At the time, he was a medical student and she was studying for her master’s in art history.

The introductory line was “pretty non-original,” Sigal admits. “But extremely effective.” The Sigals have been together for 40 years.

Sigal put his training to work in research and development in the pharmaceutical field, ultimately serving as executive vice president and chief scientific officer at Bristol-Myers Squibb from 2004 to 2013. Under his leadership, more than 12 new medicines were brought to market. Among these was the first checkpoint inhibitor for cancer immunotherapy. Up until then, combining the science of immunology with cancer drug development was not well accepted. His team developed an industry-leading pipeline of immunotherapies for cancer and helped transform the way cancer drugs are now developed.

“Even though it’s profound when it works, immunotherapy works on fewer patients than we would like to see,” said Sigal, whose parents both died from cancer at young ages. “I dedicated my post-Bristol-Myers Squibb career to helping researchers take this to the next level.”

To that end, the Sigals endowed UChicago’s first fellowship in cancer immunotherapy this year. The inaugural Elliott Sigal, MD’81, Fellow is Jonathan Trujillo, MD, PhD, whose research seeks to identify tumor-intrinsic oncogene pathways that mediate cancer immune evasion and resistance to immunotherapies. Trujillo is a member of the UChicago laboratory of Thomas Gajewski, AB’84, PhD’89, MD’91, a pioneer in the field of cancer immunotherapy. The couple also established the Elliott Sigal, MD’81, Immuno-Oncology Lectureship.

Sigal’s current focus is on mentoring the next generation of biotechnology innovators. He co-chairs the Amgen Scientific Advisory Board and advises health care investors at New Enterprise Associates.

“The University of Chicago is at the forefront of cancer immunotherapy,” Sigal said. “UChicago Medicine has made major contributions to this area in the past and we should expect great things in the future.

“I am grateful for my time at the University,” Sigal said. “The willingness to think outside the box and the deep emphasis on working on what is best for patients have always stayed with me.”



Elliott Sigal, MD’81, PhD, and Ruth Leff Sigal, AM’79, at their California home. The couple endowed UChicago’s first fellowship in cancer immunotherapy.

Family has been a major influence in Sigal’s life. His father, who worked at Eli Lilly, always encouraged his son to pursue his interests at the highest level, which is how Sigal came to earn a PhD in industrial engineering at Purdue University. “My mother’s struggle with cancer caused me to reflect on where my career would go next,” he said. He entered the Pritzker School of Medicine determined to pursue interdisciplinary research that might someday be life changing for other families.

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