

Watch Blood Cancer Researchers Share Key Career Advice With College Students

Scientists from the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society participated in a career development program for college members. Here's what they said.

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This post is by Gwen Nichols, MD, Chief Medical Officer, Leukemia & Lymphoma Society.

I recently had the privilege of moderating an [LLS on Campus](#) Researcher Panel attended by LLS college club members from nearly 30 universities across the country. These clubs bring together students interested in pursuing health-related careers and provide opportunities to hear from scientists working to better understand and treat blood cancers.

Our [virtual Researcher Panel](#) featured three incredible LLS-funded investigators, who participate in [LLS's Career Development Program \(CDP\)](#), which supports the work of early-career blood cancer researchers. Our panel included:

- [Dr. Jeffery Magee](#), who directs the pediatric leukemia and lymphoma program at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis and St. Louis Children's Hospital. Dr. Magee's work focuses on causes and treatments for childhood acute myeloid leukemia.
- [Dr. Neha Mehta-Shah](#), also from Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, who is an Assistant Professor of Medicine, specializing in peripheral and cutaneous T-cell lymphomas. She has developed a nationally-recognized T-cell lymphoma program and leads multiple trials in T-cell lymphoma nationally.
- [Dr. Nirav Shah](#), who is currently an Associate Professor of Medicine at the Medical College of

Wisconsin, Division of Hematology and Oncology, specializing in lymphoma, stem cell transplant, and CAR-T therapy.

I asked each doctor how they got involved in oncology and their best advice for students interested in healthcare. Here are their top insights.

Be Open to Possibilities

It's OK if you don't have your exact career path figured out. Our speakers agreed that trying new things, meeting new people, tapping into their interests, and sometimes just trusting their gut helped them determine what they wanted to do.

"Keep in mind what excites you, but also keep your mind open," said Dr. Mehta-Shah. As the daughter of a pediatrician, she always knew she wanted to be a doctor. After shadowing a pediatric hematologist in high school, she was drawn to the relationship that patients have with their doctors in oncology. She went into college and med school thinking she would be a pediatric oncologist but was drawn to adult medicine instead.

"There's really no particular formula, or one way to contribute to blood cancer research," said Dr. Magee. You might be a basic scientist, clinician, philanthropist, or policy advocate. "Follow what interests you, but be opportunistic, and when there's a great undergraduate opportunity, walk through that door." His experience working in a fly lab as an undergraduate sparked his interest in developmental biology and molecular genetics and shaped his direction in med school and beyond. He had expected to be an adult oncologist but found as a third-year med student that he liked pediatrics better. His focus on blood cancers came while working in a lab focusing on stem cells and stem-cell biology.

Dr. Nirav Shah tried different specialties in med school and chose oncology because it encompassed all parts of general medicine. "We take care of really sick people, we use exciting drugs, but the greatest selling point of being an oncologist is the relationships," meeting, guiding and helping people at their most vulnerable point of life, he said. How did he wind up doing cell therapy? That's where chance and opportunity came into play. He'd always loved the University of Pennsylvania, so he applied there for his fellowship, without knowing that they were doing groundbreaking work on cell therapy and CAR-T. He got accepted, and "got to be on the cutting edge of a therapy that was revolutionizing how we treat cancer," he said. That training helped him later build a program to advance and improve CAR-T therapy. "Say 'yes' to opportunities," he emphasized, "because you never know what direction your future will take you."

Find Mentors

Don't be afraid to contact professors and others in fields that interest you. While in med school at

Northwestern University, Dr. Meta-Shah attended a lecture on cancer pharmacology given by Steven T. Rosen, MD, then chief of Northwestern's cancer center (and former LLS National Board member). When he encouraged students to reach out, she emailed him, sharing her interest in cancer and clinical research, and asking if he knew of any faculty members willing to work with medical students. He invited her to join his clinical research in skin T-cell lymphomas. "I did, and my world was changed," she said. He mentored her through med school, and then connected her with a nationally regarded expert in T-cell lymphoma who became her forever mentor. "Meeting people who match your interests and personality and can help you grow and thrive is so critical," she said. "You never know when you're going to run into someone who really has a large role in changing the way you look at things."

Embrace and Build on Breakthroughs

Each of our speakers spoke passionately about the progress made in genomics and immunotherapy, and all that's on the horizon. "It's mind-blowing when you understand the pathways that diseases use to grow and spread, and that you can then inhibit those pathways with just a pill," said Dr. Nirav Shah. And with the advent of genomic sequencing, "we can look at how a patient's particular genetic composition shapes their cancer so that it can be better treated," added Dr. Magee, who said he's particularly excited about advances in understanding the nuances of pediatric leukemia and [LLS's PedAL master clinical trial](#) which focuses on treatments tailored to each child's leukemia. Dr. Meta-Shah feels fortunate to be part of the development of drugs specific to rare T-cell lymphoma, and emphasized how collaborative science can be, as you learn from each other and build on the research that came before.

Consider How You Might Improve Health Equity

Despite advances in blood cancer treatments, many patients cannot access them because they can't afford them or may not live near major cancer centers where new treatments are offered. Fields like healthcare policy can help address these inequities. "We're not delivering these therapies at the level we would like to," said Dr. Nirav Shah. "A challenge for your generation is to help us improve our accessibility."

Stay Positive

Medicine can be a bumpy road, with great successes, as well as moments of failure, noted Dr. Nirav Shah. "I've had grant applications rejected for projects. I've had people tell me it can't be done. It's easy to get disheartened. Stay positive and focused on your goal. Don't let the disappointments take you off track. The fun thing about this job is that every day is exciting, every day is different and there's no better way to go home than knowing that every day that you get to help other people."

For more great advice from these researchers, you can listen to the recording of the Campus Researcher Panel [HERE](#).

Want to start a club on your campus? Fill out the form [HERE](#).

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