

Notable Cancer Center Member
Leonidas C. Platanius, MD, PhD



A native of Greece, Leonidas C. Platanius, MD, PhD, initially became interested in medicine as a child, perhaps the first glimpse of his inventive spirit since no one in his family had a medical background. He was first introduced to oncology early in his studies at the University of Patras Medical School in Patras, Greece, where he earned his MD and PhD. “I learned that so many were affected by cancer, and the idea of helping such a significant number of people made me realize the far-reaching implications of work in this field,” says Dr. Platanius, and with this realization began his focused medical aspirations.

At the University of Patras Medical School – a new academic prototype based on the American medical school model – the faculty were medical professionals recently returned from teaching and working in the United States. Dr. Platanius’ professors inspired and encouraged him to continue his career in the U.S. upon graduation, and in 1984 he landed a Fogarty Fellow position at the prestigious National Institute of Health in Bethesda, Maryland. Researching aplastic anemia, he began the immunology studies that would subsequently play a role in his career direction.

After completing his research training at the National Institute of Health, Dr. Platanius began his internal medicine residency in 1986 at State University of New York in Brooklyn, New York. Working in an extremely underprivileged urban area at the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, he “saw a staggering number of AIDS cases” which motivated him to also conduct research on the hematology of the disease, an unusual accomplishment for a resident.

Upon completing his residency and becoming Board Certified in Internal Medicine – the first doctor in his family – Dr. Platanius moved to the Midwest in 1989 to become a fellow in Hematology/Oncology at the University of Chicago. It was during his fellowship that he officially became a clinical oncologist and began to research in the field that would become his career specialty – molecular biology and signal transduction.

Dr. Platanius’ first faculty appointment was in 1992 as Assistant Professor of Medicine at Loyola University in Maywood, Illinois, and here he established his own lab and conducted independent research. Securing a five-year grant from the National Cancer Institute (NCI) to study the role of IRS-proteins in Type IFN signaling and a two-year grant from the Department of Veterans Affairs to study signal transduction of the interferon alfa receptor in neoplastic cells, Dr. Platanius’ research notoriety was on the rise. In 1993, he won the highly recognized American Society of Clinical Oncology, Young Investigator Award and was honored with the prestigious American Cancer Society Career Development Award from 1993 to 1996.

Joining the University of Illinois at Chicago faculty as Associate Professor in 1996, Dr. Platanius was promoted to Professor of Medicine in 2001. He served as Chief of Hematology/Oncology from 2000-2001 and was the Director of the Cellular Signaling Program at the University of Illinois Cancer

Center from 2001-2002. It was at the University of Illinois that Dr. Platanius’ expanded research endeavors achieved increased national status and gained significant funding support: a three-year grant (2001-2003) from the American Cancer Society to study signaling pathways mediating hematopoietic stem cell suppression; a five-year grant (2002-2007) from the National Cancer Institute to study signal transduction of Type I interferons in malignant cells; and a four-year grant (2002-2006) from the National Cancer Institute to study the mechanism of action of interferon in chronic myelogenous leukemia.

In May of 2002, Dr. Platanius became the Deputy Director of the Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center of Northwestern University. As an endowed Chair of the Lurie family, Dr. Platanius is a Jesse, Sara, Andrew, Abigail, Benjamin and Elizabeth Lurie Professor of Oncology as well as a Professor of Medicine at the Feinberg School of Medicine, Northwestern University. About his decision to come to Northwestern University, Dr. Platanius shares, “Northwestern is a great university, and the Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center of Northwestern University has become the premier facility of this type in the region, a place of rapid growth and expansion where I can realize both my academic and professional aspirations.”

Dr. Platanius continues his grant-based molecular biology and biochemistry research in signal transduction for cytokines in order to understand the mechanisms within the cancer cells by which various substances affect functionality.

As Deputy Director, Dr. Platanius has many oversight responsibilities in addition to his research and teaching. He oversees the Shared Resource Core Facilities, a network of 18 facilities that provide various support services for investigators of the Cancer Center. He also directs the development of the Cancer Center’s efforts to procure new, significant research