

## NOTABLE CANCER CENTER MEMBER

### Jamie Von Roenn, MD



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**P**rofessor of Medicine Jamie Von Roenn, MD, Medical Director of Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Palliative Care and Home Hospice Program, has her work cut out for her. Helping doctors and patients understand that pain does not have to be synonymous with cancer is a big undertaking.

The knowledge and means to provide adequate relief for the vast majority of patients with cancer-related pain have been available for more than 20 years, yet according to Von Roenn, people aren't getting the message. "The message shouldn't be that pain is a fact of life. The message should be that symptoms can be controlled, and although they're commonly associated with cancer and its care, there is a lot we can do to prevent and manage side effects and symptoms while we treat the cancer. Best care really means integrating symptom management into oncology care."

Pain relief is not the whole story when it comes to palliative care, Von Roenn emphasizes. "Pain is one of the symptoms that people are most afraid of, but fatigue can be debilitating as well, and people are afraid of nausea. There are things we can do, and we should be talking about them whether the patient is cured or not, whether the patient is getting treatment or not. These are not only treatment issues; they are survivorship issues."

Following her residency and fellowship training at Rush-Pres-St. Luke's Medical Center, Von Roenn joined Northwestern University's

Feinberg School of Medicine as an instructor in medical oncology and Northwestern Memorial Hospital as a physician in 1985. Already drawn to the study of palliative care, she held administrative appointments as Medical Director of the Northwestern Memorial Hospice (1986-93) and as director of the Palliative Care Course (1987 – 93). Von Roenn became an assistant professor of medicine in 1988, an associate professor in 1992, and a professor in 2000. She also served as clinical practice director of Hematology / Oncology from 1999-2003.

Von Roenn's interest and expertise in palliative care is an asset in her sizeable breast cancer practice. "As oncologists we should all be palliative care physicians on some level. There is a need for skilled expertise when it comes to managing difficult symptoms or hard to treat problems, but the practice of palliative care should not be reserved for the specialists." Von Roenn believes the role of palliative care should be a given. "It's part of geriatric care, it's part of cardiology; it should be part of medicine!"

The goal of palliative care is to prevent and relieve suffering, and to support the best possible quality of life for patients and their families. Von Roenn recognizes that there are a lot of misconceptions surrounding its practice, and she's dedicated to correcting them. "I think of it as symptom management, period", she says. "Our program isn't new. What's altered is that we're trying to integrate it more completely into the hospital. Palliative care is an extension of the principals of hospice, but from the beginning of care—not waiting until people are in pain or decline."

Von Roenn's goals for her program include controlling pain, providing psychosocial and spiritual care, and emotional support for patients and their families. She observes, "It takes a team to take good care of people. None of us can do everything. As a community we need to value what the social workers, psychologists and chaplains bring to the table. We have to collaborate, because patients benefit from all of the input."

The strength of current research demonstrating that palliative care shares the same scientific basis as other fields is exciting to Von Roenn. "It puts palliative care in the right perspective when it can be seen throughout the spectrum of science; from bench to bedside."

Throughout her career Von Roenn has been actively involved with a number of committees and editorial boards. She is the Editor-In-Chief of *The Journal of Supportive Oncology*, served as chair of the AIDS Malignancy Consortium, and currently sits on the Board of Directors of the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) and the American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine (AAHPM).

Involvement with people she cares about gives Von Roenn great satisfaction—and she cares about a lot of people. Her patients, her colleagues and her family all benefit from her compassion. Because she understands the importance of communication and empathy, she formed an alliance with the Schwartz Center, which produces the monthly Schwartz Rounds series. Described on their website, [theschwartzcenter.org](http://theschwartzcenter.org), as a "unique and highly effective forum for improving the relationship and increasing the understanding between patients and clinical caregivers," the sessions are held on the third Thursday of each month at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. The program helps healthcare workers to improve communication with patients and each other, and provides insight into areas of patient care that are rarely taught. "It's a forum for discussing issues of grief, understanding and caretaking, while addressing non-medical aspects of care," Von Roenn explains. "There's something very invigorating about it," she muses.

It's not surprising that Von Roenn would recognize the value of such a forum in the world of medicine. "Giving time to others is important to me. The science of oncology is exciting because it's always changing, but what continues to draw me to it is taking care of people."