featured faculty
PATIENT PARTNER

FOR SURGICAL ONCOLOGIST SANDRA WONG, MD, delivering sobering news to patients is difficult. “I always say to them, ‘It would have been nicer to have met you under different circumstances, but I feel privileged to accompany you on this journey.’ I’ve always been taken by how a cancer diagnosis immediately puts patients in a different frame of mind, and struck by how resilient they are in treatment,” she says. “But they need a partner, and I feel incredibly privileged to fill that role.” Wong is a nationally recognized authority in the management of soft tissue sarcomas, melanoma, Merkel Cell carcinoma, and gastrointestinal cancers.

Wong’s compassion and humility extend to her administrative work at Dartmouth-Hitchcock as well. In 2015, she left the University of Michigan (UM) to join Dartmouth’s faculty as chair of surgery at Dartmouth-Hitchcock (D-H) and the Geisel School of Medicine—one of the first women in the U.S. to be named chair of a department of surgery—and senior vice president of the Surgical Service Line at D-H. And more recently, she was named president-elect of the Society of University Surgeons.

Despite these impressive accomplishments, Wong asserts that her achievements have never been about her. “For me, it’s about being a servant leader,” she explains. “I have a great team and wonderful section chiefs, and we’re all committed to working together to make the department better.”

Wong has also been recognized for her skill as an educator; while at UM she was recognized for excellence in teaching both medical students and residents. “It’s the greatest honor one can receive to have the people you work with and train thank you for teaching them,” she says. “I chose a career in academic surgery because I love being part of someone’s academic development. I’ve been fortunate to have good teachers and mentors, and I wanted to be on the other side of that equation.”

It’s clear that Wong believes deeply in the power of facilitating positive change, whether with patients, students, or co-workers. She says it was the ethos at D-H that drew her to the Upper Valley. “When I was offered the chair here at Dartmouth-Hitchcock, I felt compelled to make the move for three big reasons. The job represented an incredible opportunity to lead a department in a hospital that’s aligned with the things that I believe: the right care at the right time in the right place; the institution is a National Cancer Institute-designated cancer center, which is very important to me; and the research done at Dartmouth is something that I have always admired as a health services researcher.”

What Wong did not appreciate at the time, however, was how important it was for society to see a woman as chair of a surgery department. “In 2015, I was one of only a handful of women chairs, but thankfully that has changed dramatically in the last several years. Now there are 22 female chairs of surgery departments—it’s a wonderful development. My colleagues and I have the chance to be role models for the next generation of physicians, which is very gratifying.”

That said, Wong does not restrict herself to clinical and administrative duties. She is also an active researcher with a strong interest in health services. “The desire to realize advances in patient care and in the healthcare system in general is what drives me.”

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