

Mark Washburn



# PATIENT PARTNER

**F**OR 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.” But as a researcher, she explains, you must have patience, coupled with a healthy sense of urgency. “You do research because you hope to make an impact, but at the

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same time, it’s rare for research to have a quick impact—it’s a bit of a conundrum. It’s hard to be an impatient person doing research, but if you’re not impatient, then nothing gets done,” she says with a chuckle.

But if you’re fortunate, Wong continues, you eventually witness the results of that persistence. She points out, for example, that in the very early days of her career, sentinel node biopsy was a new technique in the detection of breast cancer that was the focus of her research. “In the space of 20 years, it’s become standard practice. I think it’s great that no one thinks of the procedure as new anymore.” Melanoma treatments have made dramatic strides, as well. “For decades, we had nothing to offer that was effective, but in the last four or five years, we’ve seen medications emerge that are spectacularly effective, which is very exciting.”

Day-to-day, Wong is content doing her part to improve patient care, in whatever form that takes. “I love it when I can start my day early with some thinking time—working on a project or finishing a research paper—and then have a few good meetings with colleagues where we get some things done. And if I can complete my day with an operation or a few patient visits, it’s been a perfect day.”

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LORI FERGUSON