Introducing Alan Ashworth, PhD, FRS

Alan Ashworth, PhD, FRS, one of the world’s preeminent cancer scientists, assumed the role of president of the UCSF Helen Diller Family Comprehensive Cancer Center this January. Ashworth studies genes involved in cancer risk, and was a key player on the team that discovered the gene BRCA2, which is linked to a heightened risk of breast, ovarian and other cancers.

He went on to develop a treatment for BRCA1- and BRCA2-related cancers that was recently approved by the FDA. Before coming to UCSF, Ashworth was chief executive of The Institute of Cancer Research, London. Learn more about Dr. Ashworth in this issue of Oncology Connection, or visit www.ucsfhealth.org/ashworth.
The joint appointment makes Ashworth responsible for UCSF cancer research as well as clinical cancer care at six different sites in San Francisco and Oakland.

“My goal is to accelerate the movement from insights to therapies and cures – and to expand access to cures through a patient-centered, co-management approach with community physicians,” says Ashworth. Perhaps the most visible indicator of Ashworth’s commitment to patient-centered care is the plan to build a 170,000-square-foot cancer outpatient building at Mission Bay, adjacent to UCSF Bakar Cancer Hospital and just down Third Street from the Helen Diller Family Cancer Research Building. There, patients will have access to all the latest treatments – including, where appropriate, the full array of UCSF clinical trials.

“The emphasis will be on precision cancer medicine – providing the right treatment to the right patient at the right time,” says Ashworth. Patient concerns will drive everything from the new building’s design to the expanded availability of patient navigators to ease patient journeys. Goals include minimizing wait times, speeding consultations with appropriate specialists, easing coordination with community physicians and finding appropriate housing for families who must travel for their care.

Public health goals include aggressively addressing well-documented cancer-related health disparities and redoubling efforts in smoking cessation. An active community advisory group chaired by Arnold Perkins, MPH, the former director of the Alameda County Public Health Department, will help set priorities.

Tapping the Latest Discoveries

Ashworth intends to combine this extreme attentiveness to patient and community needs with UCSF’s unique ability to leverage the latest advances in care.

Three new developments exemplify this approach:

- A UCSF Molecular Oncology Unit will uncover methods and define guidelines that will enable clinicians to reliably match individual patients with established and novel therapies that precisely, effectively and rapidly target genomic abnormalities.
- A Center for BRCA Research and an associated clinic will work with those at risk for contracting BRCA-related cancers and those that already have such cancers, even as researchers leverage and develop new therapies and preventative measures for cancers with the BRCA mutation.
- A Cancer Immunotherapeutics program and Clinical Trials Unit will take advantage of tremendous strides made in the field, UCSF’s leadership for over two decades in this arena and its critical mass of world-class investigators and clinicians.

Partnering with Community Health Systems

Finally, because he believes partnering with community physicians is the way to deliver the best results for the most patients, Ashworth is building collaborative arrangements with health systems throughout the Bay Area.

“Improved outcomes correlate with patients receiving their care through research-intensive institutions, but care is always an ongoing process,” says Ashworth. “Working together – bringing together the science and the clinical care – is how we’ll ultimately cure the disease, and if we’re not in the game to do that, what are we doing?”

To learn more about cancer care at UCSF Medical Center, visit www.ucsfhealth.org/cancer.