

# UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI‘I CANCER CENTER CONNECTION

## Overview of the Oncology Landscape in Hawai‘i and Introduction to the New University of Hawai‘i Cancer Center Director

Shane Y. Morita MD, PhD, FACS

The Cancer Center Connection is a standing column from the University of Hawai‘i Cancer Center and is edited by HJH&SW Contributing Editor Shane Y. Morita MD, PhD, FACS.

### Introduction

This year in Hawai‘i, it is estimated that nearly 8500 residents will be diagnosed with cancer and over 2500 patients will die of this disease.<sup>1</sup> While the numbers may pale in comparison to other states, Hawai‘i is tasked with distinct challenges. It possesses the most diverse population in the country and is the only state in the nation composed entirely of islands. It is located in the center of the Pacific Basin and thus is a referral hub for tertiary care. Although heart disease is the most common cause of overall death in the United States, in Asian men and women, cancer is the leading cause of mortality; additionally, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander females die of cancer more than any other condition.<sup>2</sup> These multi-ethnic disparities and geographic barriers place Hawai‘i in a compelling situation for the fight against cancer, both from a clinical as well as a scientific standpoint.

The World Health Organization director general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus stated on May 5, 2023, “With great hope, I declare COVID-19 over as a global health emergency.”<sup>3</sup> Although the pandemic is waning, provider shortages are also becoming more apparent for those with cancer, especially on the neighbor islands. Creating more research infrastructure and expanding clinical trials will promote more opportunities for patients to receive innovative therapy without leaving the state. With that impetus, the importance of the University of Hawai‘i Cancer Center has become magnified. It is the only National Cancer Institute designated Cancer Center in the Pacific and has held this distinction since 1996. It conducts world-class research and has been a fixture on campus in the Kaka‘ako neighborhood on the island of Oahu since 2013. Strengthening existing partnerships and building new collaborations will be paramount in order to reduce the hardship created by cancer. The Hawai‘i Cancer Consortium is led by the University of Hawai‘i (UH) Cancer Center and members include: Adventist Health Castle, Hawai‘i Medical Service Association, Hawai‘i Pacific Health, Kuakini Medical Center, The Queen’s Health System, and UH Mānoa’s John A. Burns School of Medicine.

Dr. Naoto Ueno took the helm of the UH Cancer Center as its director on December 12, 2022. He is not only a medical oncologist and scientist but also a cancer survivor. He received his MD from Wakayama Medical College of Japan and obtained his PhD in Cancer Biology from The University of Texas Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences. He performed his Clinical Residency in Internal Medicine at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center and Clinical Fellowship in Medical Oncology and Blood and Marrow Transplantation at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center. In addition to being the Director of the University of Hawai‘i Cancer Center, he is also Interim Program Co-Leader, Cancer Biology and Therapeutic Program, University of Hawai‘i Cancer Center as well as Full Member, Cancer Biology and Therapeutic Program (Translational and Clinical Research), University of Hawai‘i Cancer Center. His academic appointments include being Professor (Researcher), University of Hawai‘i Cancer Center, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa as well as Professor, Department of Medicine, John A. Burns School of Medicine, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa.

In my recent conversation with him, he indicated that his mission is “to bring inclusivity and expand our workforce’s diversity, ultimately leading to innovation and productivity.” He is the first Asian who has held this post in Hawai‘i. He and his wife enjoy the culture of Hawai‘i and became interested in relocating from Texas when an opportunity presented itself. He is fully aware of the need to pursue funding externally including exploring governmental and philanthropic initiatives.

I asked him 3 principal questions that centered on short-term, intermediate, and long-term goals.

### Short-term Goal

Launch an early phase clinical trial unit which will allow patients to receive more novel therapies in Hawai‘i. Dr. Ueno would like to see this operationalized within the next 1.5 years and feels this will provide added value to what is already offered in the state.

## Intermediate Goal

Establish a medical oncology fellowship in 5 years to encourage oncology specialists to remain in Hawai'i and provide a platform for them to care for cancer patients. Dr. Ueno is a strong advocate for education and enjoys teaching and mentoring.

## Long-term Goal

Be widely regarded for our high-quality clinical care as well as research and create a strong connection with Asia. Dr. Ueno has a formidable desire to be impactful not only locally, but regionally and, eventually, internationally.

In the succeeding months after our meeting this spring, he has already interfaced with many community stakeholders and health system leaders and is fostering relationships within the Hawai'i Cancer Consortium. He has also initiated dialogue with other organizations including the Hawai'i Society of Clinical Oncology, where he is proposing educational seminars. He acknowledged that some of these activities occurred before his arrival but emphasized that it is a priority of the University of Hawai'i Cancer Center to keep engagement high amongst everyone. He also sees the John A. Burns School of Medicine as a resource for forming an Oncology Division.

## Conclusion

Cancer care in Hawai'i is complex given the diverse population and geographic isolation. Although the pandemic is waning, cancer patients throughout the state are still facing barriers. Therefore, it is imperative that existing partnerships are strengthened, and new relationships are developed with the University of Hawai'i Cancer Center in order to promote the greatest chance to deliver the most appropriate trial. With the vision of new leadership, it is optimistic that Dr. Ueno and his team will achieve the goals that were declared at the outset.

### Author's Affiliations:

- University of Hawai'i Cancer Center, John A. Burns School of Medicine, Honolulu, HI; and The Queen's Health Systems, Honolulu, HI

## References

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