



# MILENA VILLARROEL CHILE

**Dr. Milena Villarroel is a Paediatric Hemato Oncologist with the Faculty of Medicine, University of Chile.** She is the Head of Oncology Unit at the Hospital Luis Calvo Mackenna, a paediatric public hospital part of the Chilean National Pediatric Cancer Program (PINDA) from the Ministry of Health. Since 2003, she is member of the Administrative Committee of PINDA and National Coordinator of Sarcoma Protocols and Neuroblastoma. She is a Founding member of the Latin American Pediatric Oncology Group (GALOP), and had actively participated in developing and conducting independent regional studies in Latin America as Coordinator of Metastatic Ewing Sarcoma protocol and Rare Tumors Initiative. In 2020, she assumed the role of Chair of GALOP, being very much committed to enhancing close cooperation within the region in research and treatment of paediatric cancer. She has developed a robust background in research and collaboration, addressing areas such as global initiatives, paediatric sarcoma and rare tumors, translational research, and febrile neutropenia.

Moreover, her engagement with international collaboration extends globally as the Chilean Delegate and President-Elect of the Latin-American Society of Pediatric Oncology (SLAOP), a member of the International Society of Pediatric Oncology (SIOP), involved in Advocacy, and holding positions on the Regional Advisory Committee and ARIA Steering Committee from St Jude's Global Initiative. She received the Trajectory Award from the Colegio Médico de Chile in 2023 and from the Third Latinamerican Women's Leader Forum in 2024.

**"Attitude is a  
little thing that  
makes a big  
difference"**

**Winston  
Churchill**

## On Relationships that Influenced My Career

Throughout my career, I have had the privilege of collaborating with remarkable individuals who have left an indelible mark on both my professional and personal development. Dr. Humberto del Pozo, my first boss and mentor, stands out as a visionary figure with a profound dedication to treating children and adolescents with cancer in Chile since the 1970s. His emphasis on quality and continuous self-improvement instilled in me a genuine work ethic that has shaped my approach to my profession. Working alongside luminaries like Dr. Juan Quintana and Victoria Beresi further enriched my understanding of excellence in healthcare. Dr. Gastón Rivera, a colleague of Dr. del Pozo and a successful practitioner at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, not only excelled in his career but also remained committed to uplifting his home country. His mentorship and guidance during my early career, providing insights into patient care and oncology with a strong research orientation, significantly influenced my professional practice.

Moreover, the collaborative efforts of my peers at PINDA, particularly Drs. Lautaro Vargas and Myriam Campbell, were pivotal in shaping my understanding of cooperative teamwork from the nascent stages of my career. Participating in the establishment of Latin American GALOP Group alongside distinguished individuals like Drs. Luis Castillo, Marcelo Scopinaro, Sergio Petrilli, Algimir Brunetto, and Guillermo Chantada demonstrated the power of regional cooperation in advancing oncology research with limited resources. This experience underscored the importance of generating credible evidence tailored to our region, fueling my passion and determination to contribute meaningfully to the field. The collective impact of these exceptional individuals has been transformative, propelling me to strive for excellence and collaboration in all facets of my professional journey.

## On Challenges and Overcoming Them

Starting my career as a head of a unit at a young age posed significant challenges, especially amidst a hierarchical leadership environment dominated by older male counterparts. Rather than conforming to this traditional leadership style, I chose to persist in fostering strong consensus among my team members and aligning them effectively to tasks where they excelled, leading to improved results with less effort and time expended compared to simply imposing strategies. This allowed the conformation of a robust and committed team, the backbone of any successful endeavor, with a diversity that fosters innovation and creativity.

In Latin America, challenges often manifest in the form of constrained resources, necessitating strategic resource management and innovative solutions to overcome obstacles and drive progress in various fields. This required me to recognize the power of effective planning, identifying the value in existing tools, and embracing a culture of continuous quality improvement. This philosophy extended beyond my immediate unit to encompass broader regional initiatives as well, emphasizing the importance of leveraging available resources intelligently and strategically. Acknowledging the significance of thorough planning, multi-centric collaboration, valuing clinical research, and pursuing a commitment to enhancing quality, not only helped to overcome these constraints but also laid a foundation for sustainable progress.

## On Balancing Career and Other Life Responsibilities

Balancing career aspirations with personal responsibilities is a delicate dance that requires support and understanding from loved ones and colleagues. In my case, having a supportive husband proved instrumental in maintaining this equilibrium. Together, we navigated the complexities of our respective career demands,

fostering a partnership built on mutual respect and collaboration. His unwavering support allowed us to synchronize our ambitions while ensuring that both our professional and personal needs were met. Furthermore, having understanding children who always felt loved and cared for created a nurturing environment where I could focus on my career with peace of mind. Additionally, fostering a sense of camaraderie within my team was vital. By cultivating strong relationships based on trust and support among colleagues, we formed a network of individuals who had each other's backs. This team companionship not only enhanced productivity and morale but also provided a safety net that alleviated some of the challenges of balancing work and personal life. Together, these elements created a supportive ecosystem that empowered me to successfully navigate the intricate balance between career responsibilities and personal commitments.

### **My Words of Wisdom for the Next Generation of Female Leaders**

Seize the myriad opportunities that come your way, recognizing that success is often the culmination of consistent effort over time. Change may not manifest immediately; it demands dedication and perseverance, even during moments when progress seems remote. Remember that each day of hard work contributes to the foundation of your future achievements, no matter how distant they may appear. When others question how you managed to reach your current position, reflect on the fact that you were once in their shoes facing similar uncertainties. Embrace the journey, stay resilient in the face of challenges, and trust in the process of continual growth and learning. By remaining steadfast in your pursuits and maintaining a long-term perspective, you are actively shaping your path towards success, step by step.