



MITHRA GHALIBAFIAN

IRAN

Dr. Mithra Ghalibafian is the Head of the Paediatric Radiation Oncology Department at MAHAK Paediatric Cancer Treatment and Research Centre in Tehran, Iran. After graduating from the Iran University of Medical Sciences in 1994, she furthered her education in Graz, Austria, where she gained foundational experience in pathology and medical engineering.

Upon returning to Iran, she worked as a General Practitioner in an underserved area and participated in the WHO's Polio Eradication Programme. In 1997, she began her residency in Radiation Oncology at the National Cancer Institute in Tehran, achieving first place in the National Board Certification Examination in 2000. She contributed to establishing the first Radiation Oncology Department at Kurdistan University of Medical Sciences.

In 2006, she founded Iran's first radiation oncology facility dedicated to childhood cancer after completing a fellowship at the Gustave Roussy Institute in France. As the country's only paediatric radiation oncologist, she introduced advanced treatment techniques and trained staff to deliver over 200 paediatric tumour treatments annually.

"We will only be patient when we see patience as a strength, not a weakness. And what destroys us is not the daily grind, but our small patience and big dreams."

Romain Rolland

Her participation in the Neuro-oncology Observership Programme at the Hospital for Sick Children in Canada was crucial in launching Iran's first paediatric neuro-oncology programme in 2020, treating over 100 brain tumours annually. Her involvement with international organisations has provided valuable insights into improving childhood cancer outcomes in low-resource environments.

On Relationships that Influenced My Career

The most significant influences in my life have shaped both my personal and professional journey, beginning with my father. His unwavering positivity in the face of adversity served as a cornerstone of my character. He often reminded me that a Gaussian curve has two minority sides, highlighting that every challenge has its solutions, and reassured me that I was never alone in my struggles. He instilled in me a sense of responsibility to contribute to my community, particularly in a resource-limited country. His remarkable journey, from studying in France to returning home to develop vital infrastructure, earned him the esteemed title of Iran's Father of Concrete.

Another pivotal influence was Dr. Kamaledin Dehshiri, my mentor and Head of the Radiation Oncology Department at the National Cancer Institute during my residency. He taught me to blend physics with medicine, demonstrating how to adapt modern treatments to our limited resources while maintaining a healthy work-life balance. After his studies in Great Britain, he returned home as a trailblazer in radiation oncology.

During my fellowship at the Gustave Roussy Institute in France, Dr. Theodore Girinsky introduced me to the world of research, seamlessly merging it with clinical practice. His steadfast support during challenges was invaluable, and he helped me embrace a multidisciplinary team by connecting me with remarkable colleagues, including Dr. Odile Oberlin from the Paediatric Oncology Group.

Finally, Dr. Eric Bouffet was instrumental in cultivating a multidisciplinary approach within the inaugural neuro-oncology programme. His guidance helped our team navigate the complexities of neuro-oncology, enriching my professional experience. Each of these remarkable individuals has profoundly influenced my path, inspiring me to pursue excellence in my field.

On Challenges and Overcoming Them

Establishing paediatric radiotherapy in my new department presented significant challenges, primarily due to its distinct differences from adult radiotherapy. Initially, I encountered a prevalent belief that children could be treated similarly to adults, albeit with adjusted dosages. This perspective was deeply rooted among seasoned professionals, including paediatric oncologists and radiation oncologists. As a newcomer, I quickly realised that instigating change in this environment would require patience and perseverance. I dedicated myself to raising awareness, consistently articulating the principles I had learned, and advocating for a tailored approach to paediatric care.

The second challenge involved fostering a multidisciplinary team approach. Historically, physicians operated in silos, with minimal interaction and communication across departments. Overcoming this entrenched mindset proved difficult because there was considerable resistance to collaborative practices. However, through persistent efforts over several years, I gradually encouraged colleagues to engage in dialogue and share insights for the benefit of our patients. The transformation was facilitated by positive experiences stemming from collaborative decision-making and a growing recognition of the importance of multidisciplinary care. Additionally, the support of international colleagues through twinning programmes and tumour boards played a pivotal role in this journey. One crucial lesson I learned was the importance of allowing others to make their own mistakes; this is an essential part of the learning process and often comes at a significant cost. Ultimately, these experiences underscored the necessity of resilience and adaptability in implementing meaningful changes in paediatric oncology, ensuring better outcomes for our young patients.

On Balancing Career and Other Life Responsibilities

Achieving a harmonious work-life balance is often easier said than done, yet it is essential for overall well-being and productivity. One effective strategy is to consciously prioritise your commitments in various aspects of life. Just as you allocate time for professional responsibilities, it is equally important to schedule dedicated moments for yourself and your loved ones.

These moments do not need to be lengthy; even a brief coffee break with a friend or a timely phone call can provide a refreshing reprieve from the demands of work. Engaging in regular physical activity—aiming for three to four hours per week—has proven invaluable for me in managing stress and alleviating worries.

Additionally, I find that travelling offers a vital opportunity to step back from work, gain new perspectives, and rejuvenate the spirit. I make it a point to travel at least two to three

times a year, opting for short yet impactful trips that enrich my life and broaden my horizons. By intentionally incorporating these practices into my routine, I strive to maintain a balanced and fulfilling lifestyle.

My Words of Wisdom for the Next Generation of Female Leaders

Change unfolds in its own time; be not in haste, and let hope be your companion. Embrace the journey and savour each step because, by the end, you will emerge transformed, a different person from the one who began.