



**WOMEN LEADERS  
IN PAEDIATRIC ONCOLOGY  
NETWORK**



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PAEDIATRIC ONCOLOGY**

**ALMANAC 2026**

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SIOF is proud to receive the 2026 European Association Award in the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Category for its work on the SIOF Women Leaders Network programming.

# FOREWORD

**Dear Colleagues,**

We are proud to present the 2026 edition of the Women Leaders in Paediatric Oncology Almanac, celebrating the vision, leadership, and impact of women advancing our field worldwide. This edition features profiles of inspiring leaders nominated by colleagues across the globe, representing diverse disciplines, experiences, and perspectives within pediatric oncology.

The featured profiles are reflective of the strength and dedication shown across all nominees, reminding us that women are driving innovation, collaboration, and progress in pediatric cancer care and research.

Each profile offers insight into the journeys and perspectives of these remarkable leaders. Their stories highlight the many pathways to leadership and the values that sustain it: perseverance, mentorship, collaboration, and purpose. You will also find reflections on balancing professional and personal roles, cultivating supportive networks, and building the resilience required to lead in a complex and evolving field.

At a time when global health systems face uncertainty and rapid change, strong and inclusive leadership is more important than ever. The voices and perspectives of women leaders are essential to guiding our community with clarity, compassion, and collaboration as we work toward better outcomes for children with cancer everywhere.

Together, these stories celebrate not only individual achievements but also the growing movement toward more inclusive, equitable leadership in pediatric oncology. By sharing these experiences, we hope to inspire the next generation of women leaders to step forward, lift one another up, and help shape the future of care for children with cancer.

We hope this Almanac serves as both a celebration of progress and a call to continue building a stronger, more inclusive global community.

Thank you for reading. For questions or to learn more about this initiative, please contact us at [programs@siop-online.org](mailto:programs@siop-online.org).

**Sincerely,**

**Steering Group of the SIOP Women Leaders Network:**

- Sarah Cohen-Gogo, (Co-Chair)
- Liz Sniderman, (Co-Chair)
- Constance Nyasulu (Steering Group Member)
- Nisreen Amayiri (Steering Group Member)
- Mariana Nana (Steering Group Member)
- Rawad Rihani (Steering Group Member)
- Carmen Uscatu (Steering Group Member)
- Khilola Rustamova (Steering Group Member)



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# SALMA AL-HADAD

## IRAQ

Dr. Salma Al-Hadad graduated from the College of Medicine, University of Baghdad, in 1978 and obtained a Fellowship in Paediatrics in 1986. Since 1989, she has worked in the Oncology Unit at the Children Welfare Teaching Hospital, Medical City, Baghdad.

She joined the faculty of the Medical School, University of Baghdad, in 1992, was promoted to Professor in 2001, and has served as Emeritus Professor in the Department of Paediatrics since 2022. She has been the Lead Clinician of the Paediatric Oncology Unit at Children Welfare Teaching Hospital since 1993.

She is Head of the Scientific Council of the Paediatric Haematology Fellowship within the Iraqi and Arab Board, an Associate Member of the RCPCH and UKCCSG, and a member of SIOP, SJGA and POEM. She has participated in over 100 scientific meetings and workshops, with more than 65 published papers and abstracts nationally and internationally. Since 2006, she has maintained telemedicine links with Sapienza University, Rome.

Throughout her career, she has worked under exceptionally challenging conditions, including

***"Be a good  
human being.  
There is a lot of  
opportunity in  
this area and  
very little  
competition."***

**the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), the Gulf War (1990), the sanctions and embargo period (1990–2003), the 2003 war and its aftermath, subsequent sectarian unrest, the ISIS conflict (2014–2017), and the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022).**

### On Relationships that Influenced My Career

In 1989, I was assigned to the paediatric oncology unit under the supervision of my mentor, who encouraged and supported me to pursue work in this field. I worked with him for four years, until he left Iraq in 1993 during the large wave of physician emigration that followed the 1991 scientific embargo and the prolonged period of isolation.

Although it was not my choice, I was left to care for children with cancer under extremely difficult circumstances, marked by severe shortages of medicines, equipment and essential supplies. I felt the full weight of responsibility towards my patients. I did my utmost to save them and shared in the suffering of their families. I had to set aside my aspirations of furthering my career in an advanced speciality centre outside Iraq, as, being the only supervising physician, I was not permitted to travel abroad.

In 1999, I was able to recruit a newly qualified graduate as a resident in the unit. From then on, we relied on local initiatives, continuous self-directed learning, and practical guidance from a former colleague in the United Kingdom, Dr Ayad Atra, who helped us to access treatment protocols adapted to our local context. In 2002, we established a paediatric haematology fellowship programme. We also developed an internal culture that prioritised integrity and teamwork, alongside meticulous documentation—beginning with handwritten registers, later transitioning to Excel-based records, and subsequently scanning key patient documents. Although we still lack a formal electronic database, patient information has been systematically preserved within our archives.

After 2003, we were fortunate to receive support through visits from Dr Anna Maria Testi from Rome.

With the assistance of her colleagues, we strengthened clinical management and raised standards of care through a telemedicine programme

supported by INTERSOS (2003–2013), followed by continued personal collaboration thereafter. This partnership also enabled the broader dissemination of the expertise acquired to paediatric oncology centres across Iraq.

### On Challenges and Overcoming Them

The first profound challenge in my life was the gap between what I believed medicine ought to be and what reality sometimes permits. I grew up with strong principles and discipline, carrying a deep sense of responsibility and a desire to practise medicine to the highest possible standard.

When I became a paediatric specialist, I quickly realised that real life did not match my expectations. The situation became significantly more difficult when my supervisor unexpectedly left, and I found myself solely responsible for the care of children with cancer in one of the largest hospitals in Iraq, which receives patients from across the country.

What made this period even more painful was that it coincided with the years of embargo. We faced shortages in every aspect of care: medicines, staff, equipment and institutional support. Many families lived in severe poverty, and we were largely cut off from international guidance and professional collaboration. In such an environment, I had no option but to carry the responsibility and continue, even when the system around us was failing.

The second major challenge arose following the invasion of the country and the subsequent sectarian tensions and breakdown of security in 2006–2007. Families were displaced both within Iraq and abroad, and there were targeted killings of academics, scientists and doctors aimed at driving the country's intellectual elite into exile. Reaching the hospital each day became extremely difficult, yet I chose to take the risk despite the constant dangers. The hospital itself was not secure; threats to life were ever-present, and a considerable number of staff either remained at home or left the country to seek asylum. Nevertheless, I felt compelled to continue, regardless of the circumstances.

This period was further complicated by a serious personal health challenge: in 2010, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I chose to receive chemotherapy within my own unit, thereby experiencing the same

fear, uncertainty and treatment-related complications endured by my patients. Despite these difficulties, patience and determination enabled me to overcome the illness. After nine months away from work, I returned to continue serving children and their families with renewed empathy and resilience.

## On Balancing Career and Other Life Responsibilities

I was able to balance my career with other life responsibilities thanks to the presence of my caring and supportive family, as well as committed colleagues who worked alongside me under the same challenging circumstances. Being both a teacher and a doctor strengthened my sense of responsibility and enabled me to serve as a role model for junior doctors and medical students.

The gratitude and appreciation expressed by children and their families—who endured immense difficulties alongside us in the fight against disease—have been my greatest reward and continuing source of motivation in this demanding mission.

Over the past twenty years, collaboration with colleagues from Italy and Japan has made a significant contribution to our clinical practice and scientific development. Through exposure to international standards and the presentation of our local experience and treatment outcomes to the global medical community, our capabilities in paediatric haematology and oncology have been substantially strengthened. Their professional integrity and strong medical ethics further reinforced our commitment and sustained our dedication despite the prolonged challenges and hardships we faced.

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

If I were twenty-five again, I would probably follow the same path I passed through over the past forty years. I would also advise the younger generation of professionals to love what they have chosen, dedicate their time and effort to excellence, avoiding greed and conflicts of interest, and letting integrity guide one's career.



# MELISSA HUDSON

USA

Dr Melissa Hudson is Director of the Cancer Survivorship Division in the Department of Oncology and holds the Charles E. Williams Endowed Chair of Oncology–Cancer Survivorship. She directs the St Jude After Completion of Therapy Programme, which monitors outcomes for more than 8,000 St Jude survivors, and serves as Principal Investigator of the St Jude Lifetime Cohort Study.

Dr Hudson has led the dissemination of the St Jude model of risk-based survivorship care through her leadership roles in the Children’s Oncology Group Long-Term Follow-Up Guidelines and the International Late Effects of Childhood Cancer Guideline Harmonisation Group. She works collaboratively with multidisciplinary investigators at St Jude, as well as with national and international partners, on research initiatives that evaluate biomedical and psychosocial outcomes among childhood cancer survivors. Her work focuses on translating health outcomes research into evidence-informed clinical practice guidelines and interventions that improve both the quality and duration of survival after childhood cancer.

**"Share what  
you have.**

**Giving makes  
you richer."**

**Native Alaskan  
proverb**

## On Relationships that Influenced My Career

The relationships that have been most influential in my career development are those with mentors who saw potential in me that I did not always recognise in myself. I was fortunate to have mentors who introduced me to essential domains within paediatric oncology, including clinical investigation, translational research, and long-term survivorship.

My research mentors during fellowship training were Dr Norman Jaffe and Dr Eugenie Kleinerman. Dr Jaffe was a gentle soul who exemplified the role of the clinician–investigator at a time when paediatric cancer diagnostics and therapeutics were rapidly evolving. He modelled the dedication and rigour required to oversee clinical trials and to disseminate findings to the paediatric oncology community. He was also deeply committed to educating the next generation of paediatric oncologists and generously gave his time to discuss the challenges of designing and implementing clinical trials to improve outcomes for children and adolescents with osteosarcoma.

Dr Kleinerman supervised my laboratory-based research year. During this period, I not only gained an appreciation for laboratory techniques, but also learned about the substantial time investment and perseverance required to translate pre-clinical findings into clinical trials of novel therapeutics.

Dr Les Robison was another highly influential mentor in my career development. When I ventured into late-effects research without formal training in epidemiological methods, Dr Robison was supportive and patient in guiding me towards resources and collaborators to strengthen the impact of my work. He sponsored me for opportunities that increased my visibility within survivorship research circles. He inspired me—along with a generation of other paediatric survivorship researchers—to embrace our responsibility to characterise and report the health impact of the childhood cancer experience and to use this knowledge to improve frontline care for newly diagnosed children, as well as long-term survivors living with the consequences of cancer therapy.

## On Challenges and Overcoming Them

Since my undergraduate years, my path had been relatively straightforward: from pre-medical studies to medical school, paediatric residency, and ultimately a fellowship in paediatric haematology–oncology. As a newly qualified paediatric oncologist, I had anticipated that my career would focus on leukaemia clinical trials. I soon learned, however, that these opportunities were largely reserved for more senior investigators.

Disappointed but not discouraged, I accepted an opportunity to publish the results of a recently completed Hodgkin lymphoma clinical trial. Embracing this new direction led to future leadership within the Pediatric Hodgkin Consortium and collaborations with established leaders in paediatric oncology, which in turn fostered my development and success as a clinical investigator.

Over time, alongside caring for children and adolescents with Hodgkin lymphoma, I became involved in the After Completion of Therapy Clinic, where I worked to standardise counselling and follow-up care plans for the growing number of survivors transitioning to long-term follow-up. During the 1990s, as risk-adapted treatment strategies were emerging, most frontline clinical trials in paediatric oncology focused primarily on improving five-year survival rates. As the population of long-term survivors increased, however, concerns arose regarding the need for health monitoring beyond the five-year milestone. This shift in focus posed a potential threat to the programme I was building and, more importantly, to the wellbeing of survivors who were increasingly reporting significant late effects in adulthood.

Through sustained advocacy and the generation of compelling research data, awareness grew regarding the importance of extended follow-up beyond five years. This recognition enabled the expansion of the After Completion of Therapy Clinic and the development of the infrastructure necessary to implement the highly impactful, ongoing St Jude Lifetime Cohort Study.

The first challenge taught me the value of recalibrating and remaining open to new—and potentially better—opportunities. The second reinforced my belief that passion, when coupled with robust data, can drive meaningful change

## **On Balancing Career and Other Life Responsibilities**

Finding the time to devote to one's career, family, and personal growth is inherently challenging. Academic success often requires time away from family to complete manuscripts and presentations, attend conferences, and keep pace with the rapidly expanding medical literature. The support of my spouse, parents, and siblings has been essential in providing me with the freedom to succeed in academia.

Mentors and peers have also played a vital role in offering perspective on which activities to prioritise and which to relinquish. Surrounding oneself with colleagues who respect and value work-life balance can be empowering, as they help navigate these challenges and, at times, assume responsibilities that one cannot reasonably sustain alone. Fostering an environment that places family first while maintaining a strong commitment to team success ensures that everyone works towards shared goals and supports one another through family building, elder care, career development, and health challenges.

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

I would advise my younger self that you do not need to have everything figured out. Life, family, and career opportunities rarely follow a linear path. Be open to pivoting and to embracing unanticipated opportunities. Seek guidance from mentors and family about where you can be most impactful in making the world a better place. In our case, that focus is on improving care and outcomes for children with cancer.

Draw upon the collective experience of colleagues across the globe to advance this cause. Never underestimate what you can learn—or what you can achieve—through collaboration.



# LILIANA VASQUEZ

PERU

***Listen to the  
language of life  
and move forward  
with gratitude.***

Dr. Liliana Vasquez is a Peruvian paediatric oncologist, wife, and mother of two boys. She earned her medical degree and completed her paediatric training at the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos in Lima, Peru, followed by specialist training in paediatrics and paediatric oncology. She worked for eight years in clinical practice at Hospital Rebagliati, a major referral centre within Peru's social security system.

During her clinical work, she became increasingly aware that many of the barriers affecting children with cancer—such as delayed diagnosis, treatment abandonment, and limited access to essential services—could not be addressed at the bedside alone. This realisation motivated her transition from clinical practice to public health, with the aim of strengthening policies, health systems, and equity in Peru and across Latin America. She subsequently became involved in research on global child health and health system barriers through collaborative, multi-hospital initiatives in Peru.

**In 2017, she joined the Ministry of Health of Peru, where she served as National Coordinator for Childhood Cancer, supporting the development of national regulations on early diagnosis and the standardisation of paediatric oncology services. When Peru was selected as a focal country for the WHO Global Initiative for Childhood Cancer, she moved to the Pan American Health Organization office in Peru as a national consultant.**

**She currently serves as a Technical Officer for Childhood Cancer at the Pan American Health Organization Regional Office in Washington, D.C., where she coordinates childhood cancer programmes across Latin America and the Caribbean. She holds a Master's degree in Global Child Health from St Jude Children's Research Hospital and is a former President of the Latin American Society of Pediatric Oncology (SLAOP).**

### **On Relationships that Influenced My Career**

One of the most influential relationships in my career has been my engagement within the framework of the Global Initiative for Childhood Cancer. Working through PAHO/WHO, in close collaboration with WHO and St Jude Children's Research Hospital as a WHO Collaborating Centre, fundamentally shaped my professional development. These partnerships exposed me to a model of collective leadership that demonstrated how coordinated global, regional, and national efforts can catalyse meaningful change, even in countries where childhood cancer programmes previously lacked structure, visibility, or political support. The trust, mentorship, and collaboration fostered through this initiative not only supported my own growth, but also enabled tangible progress in childhood cancer policy, service organisation, and access to care across multiple countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

A second formative influence has come from leaders within the paediatric oncology community, particularly through SLAOP and SIOP, who consistently invested in developing others. In particular, Dr Arturo Moreno,

a past President of SLAOP, played a pivotal role by actively promoting leadership in Latin America and creating opportunities for younger colleagues to engage, lead, and contribute meaningfully to regional initiatives. His long-standing commitment to mentorship has had a lasting influence on my own approach to leadership. Similarly, Dr Jenny Jerónimo, former Head of the Paediatric Oncology Unit at Hospital Rebagliati, was instrumental in my early career. She consistently placed trust in and empowered those around her, fostering confidence and a shared vision for improving care for children with cancer. Together, these experiences reinforced my conviction that leadership is not only about expertise, but about enabling others to grow and lead.

### **On Challenges and Overcoming Them**

Throughout my career, I have learned that challenges are inherent to public health work. Driving systemic change requires navigating complex environments with multiple stakeholders—governments, academia, civil society, foundations, and international organisations—often with competing priorities. One of my key challenges has been learning to lead within this complexity while maintaining humility and perspective.

Professionally, this has meant exercising leadership in settings where consensus must be built across diverse perspectives and institutional cultures. Effective public health leadership requires negotiation, technical credibility, and emotional intelligence. I have learned that leadership is not about imposing solutions, but about fostering shared understanding, trust, and ownership. These skills have been essential to advancing childhood cancer policies in Latin America.

On a personal level, being the mother of a child with special needs has been one of the most formative challenges of my life. This experience has deepened my empathy, resilience, and sense of perspective, and taught me to balance multiple roles without expecting perfection in all of them at once.

Together, these experiences have shaped a leadership approach grounded in service, shared leadership, and continuous learning, guiding both my professional and personal life.

### **On Balancing Career and Other Life Responsibilities**

Balancing a demanding career with family and personal responsibilities has never felt like a fixed or perfect state for me. Rather than striving for an ideal balance, I have learned that balance is dynamic, shifting from day to day, month to month, and year to year. One of the most valuable lessons has been not to define myself solely by my professional role. While my work is deeply meaningful and a source of great fulfilment, it does not fully define who I am.

A strong support network has been essential. I am deeply grateful for family and close friends who remain present, attentive, and supportive, particularly during more challenging periods. Knowing that others walk alongside you and can step in when needed makes a meaningful difference in sustaining both professional commitment and personal well-being.

I have also learned to accept that we can only do the best we can with what we have at any given moment. Life often feels like moving forward through changing conditions—sometimes under clear skies, sometimes through storms that limit clarity and energy. In those moments, it may not be possible to perform at full capacity, and learning to accept this reality has been an important part of maintaining balance and resilience.

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

If I could offer advice to my 25-year-old self, it would be simple: do not be afraid. Fear often holds us back from opportunities that allow us to grow, while courage creates space for learning, connection, and purpose. Many of the most meaningful steps in my career came from saying yes to challenges that felt intimidating at the time. With perspective, I have learned that growth rarely occurs within comfort.

To younger professionals entering paediatric oncology, particularly young women, I would say that this is a demanding yet deeply meaningful field. We live in complex times, and professional, personal, and social expectations can feel overwhelming. Do not be afraid to pursue paths and projects that challenge you, both professionally and personally.

I would also encourage working with gratitude, humility, empathy, and kindness. None of us

progresses alone. Many of the opportunities we have today were built by those who came before us, often through years of quiet and sustained effort. Recognising this collective legacy helps to keep our work grounded and purposeful.

Finally, remember that paediatric oncology is not only about expertise, but about humanity. Stay curious, remain connected to your values, and trust that what you contribute today can help create opportunities for those who follow.



# LAILA HESSISSEN MOROCCO

Laila Hessissen is a Professor of Paediatrics at the Faculty of Medicine in Rabat, Morocco, where she has been a member of staff since 2000. She is Head of the Paediatric Haematology-Oncology Centre at the University Hospital of Rabat. She serves as President of the Francophone-African Group of Paediatric Oncology (GFAOP) and is the former Continental President of SIOP-Africa.

Since 2014, she has been involved in the development and supervision of a Certified Diploma in Paediatric Oncology for clinicians from Francophone African countries. This programme is delivered at Mohammed V University of Rabat and is recognised by Paris-Saclay University in France. Through this initiative, she has also developed an e-learning platform dedicated to paediatric oncology in Francophone Africa.

*"My roof is made of  
iron, my corner is  
made of stone.  
So rage, winds, and  
pour down, rain"  
Arabic poem*

## On Relationships that Influenced My Career

I am grateful to my father, first and foremost, who continued to guide me in the right direction during a period of my life when I had no visibility and no clear goals, and who, even at my lowest point, kept repeating that I could succeed – not in a simplistic “yes, you can!” way, but rather by telling those around me, “yes, she can.”

I am thankful to my mentor, Professor Msefer Alaoui, who pioneered paediatric oncology in Morocco. When I arrived in 1995 as a paediatric resident, there was already a strong vision, coherence, and a deep sense of humanity within the paediatric haematology–oncology department. At the end of my residency, she did far more than open a position for me; she embraced me as her successor and paved the way for my development in paediatric oncology by introducing me to SIOP, GFAOP, and St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital. She had clearly already identified me as a future leader in the field.

In this field, I must also acknowledge that not everyone who influenced my career was benevolent. Some individuals, though not kind, nonetheless played an important role by challenging me, strengthening my determination to persevere, and showing me clearly what I did not want to become as a professional or as a leader.

## On Challenges and Overcoming Them

Challenges – yes, the crucibles of my life! I have faced several, but I will mention two.

The first came at the end of my paediatric residency, after I had chosen paediatric oncology. I was due to travel to France for my paediatric oncology internship and training, but the day before my departure I was informed that, as a civil servant of the Ministry of Health, I had been assigned to work in a rural hospital 300 kilometres from Rabat. I decided to take my chances and remain on the path I had chosen. I took my flight to Paris anyway, and a few weeks later the Faculty of Medicine opened positions for paediatric assistants in the paediatric oncology department. I returned to sit the competitive examination and was able to continue my academic career in paediatric oncology.

The second occurred at a later stage in my career, when changes in management were not in my favour and the risk of being “crushed” felt very real. I sought advice, and the person I consulted asked me a simple question: “Laila, what is your goal today?” After reflecting, I replied, “To become a mother.” She advised me to forget what was happening around me, to make myself invisible, and to focus on that goal. Since making myself invisible is not in my nature, I chose a middle ground: continuing to develop in another area that allowed me to remain in the background while still progressing in paediatric oncology and achieving my goal of becoming a mother.

It is like the line in the song “The Gambler”: “You’ve got to know when to hold ’em, know when to fold ’em, know when to walk away, and know when to run.”

## On Balancing Career and Other Life Responsibilities

It is difficult to answer that question because, ultimately, it is largely a matter of temperament.

That said, if you reflect on it, the most helpful thing is to surround yourself with good people as much as possible, both personally and professionally. Choose your circle carefully whenever you can – only positive energy. When you are surrounded by the right people, balance tends to establish itself naturally.

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

This reminds me of one of my own “crucibles” at the age of 25, when I gave myself the advice to run. It was good advice – the same lesson repeated over time: “You’ve got to know when to hold ’em, know when to fold ’em, know when to walk away, and know when to run.”

For the new generation, I would say this: they must realise that they are living in a different era from the one we knew. Their challenges are different, and so are the options available to them. They need to take time to reflect on their situation – as individuals, as members of a community and a country, and as citizens of a rapidly changing world. They must be

innovative, and they must take care of themselves and of those around them.

They should also consider their place in the future: What will the paediatric oncologist of tomorrow look like? What will paediatric oncology become? Can low- and middle-income countries catch up? Are they working to revive the Earth and heal it – or to leave it and go to Mars?

Above all, they must stay focused, think big, and learn to ride the major waves of change rather than resist them or try to avoid them.



# LISA MORRISSEY

## USA

Lisa Morrissey, MPH, MSN, RN, NE-BC, has worked as a paediatric oncology nurse for more than 40 years. After 17 years in bedside practice, she pursued a career in nursing leadership and currently serves as Senior Director of Nursing & Patient Care Services in Haematology/ Oncology/ Stem Cell Transplant at Boston Children's Hospital (BCH). Following completion of a Master's degree in Public Health, Lisa advanced her long-standing interest in global health by becoming Director of the BCH Global Nursing Fellowship, which celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2025. She has led and contributed to multiple international partnerships with paediatric oncology nurses and multidisciplinary teams across several countries.

Lisa has been actively engaged with SIOP since 2010 and served as Chair of the SIOP Nursing Network from 2018 to 2021. She currently represents nursing on the SIOP Advocacy Committee and remains closely involved in Nursing Network initiatives that promote the academic and professional development of paediatric oncology nurses, particularly those working in resource-constrained settings.

***"Let no one  
come to you  
without leaving  
better"***

***Mother Theresa***

**Lisa is presently a PhD candidate at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Her research focuses on reducing disparities by standardising the assessment of financial hardship among caregivers of children and adolescents with cancer.**

### **On Relationships that Influenced My Career**

First, I credit my parents for instilling in me a strong work ethic and a deep commitment to serving others. My father was a pharmacist who owned a small independent pharmacy in the town where I grew up. Our entire family worked in the shop, and I still remember accompanying him as he personally delivered prescriptions to elderly and disabled members of the community.

Early in my career, I learned from exceptional oncology nurses who showed me how to provide high-quality, compassionate care in an intense environment with constant competing demands. As a new nurse leader, I was profoundly influenced by Patricia Branowicki, my nursing director and mentor at Boston Children's for more than 15 years before she died from ovarian cancer. Leading a paediatric cancer programme while undergoing cancer treatment herself, Patti always kept patients and families at the centre of decision-making and demonstrated remarkable passion, integrity, and humility in her work.

I strive to follow her example: that great leaders create opportunities for others to shine and be recognised for their contributions to an organisation's mission and values by modelling excellence in every effort, both large and small.

I am continually inspired by the paediatric oncology nurses, physicians, and multidisciplinary teams who courageously care for children and families throughout the cancer journey. They witness unimaginable physical and emotional suffering, yet remain optimistic, supportive, and committed to constantly improving treatment and care. To me, this represents true dedication, compassion, and resilience.

I feel privileged and deeply grateful to have spent my career in clinical and academic environments where nurses are encouraged to pursue their aspirations and never stop learning and growing.

### **On Challenges and Overcoming Them**

Nurses serve as caregivers both in their professional roles and within their families and communities. One of my greatest challenges has been feeling that there are never enough hours in the day to fulfil the demands of my professional life while also being fully present for the people I care about most. Looking back, I wish I had understood earlier that a career path is rarely a straight line; it is shaped by many detours that often lead to unexpected and meaningful opportunities.

One of the most valuable pieces of advice I received midway through my career was to avoid comparison and to withhold judgement of myself and others. Everyone is at a different point on their journey and may be motivated or constrained by factors that are not always visible.

On a practical level, the early months of the pandemic were among the most difficult of my career as a nurse leader. I witnessed our nurses and clinical teams caring for immunocompromised children during a time of profound fear and uncertainty, while simultaneously managing children out of school, elderly parents who were unwell, and extraordinary demands on their physical and emotional wellbeing. I found that simply showing up to work each day and doing my best to support patients, families, and bedside caregivers helped me cope with my own anxiety during this unprecedented period. The experience ultimately made me stronger, as I came to recognise that many external forces affecting healthcare are beyond our control. It reinforced the importance of staying focused on what is directly in front of us and remaining grounded in the mission and values that guide our work. As new political and global challenges continue to emerge, I hold onto this lesson as a reminder to stay calm, focused, and committed.

### **On Balancing Career and Other Life Responsibilities**

Feeling supported by my husband, family, friends, and colleagues has been essential to achieving a healthy balance between work and home life (although some days are certainly more harmonious than others!). Allowing myself sufficient time to accomplish my goals has also been important; for example, every academic

degree I have pursued has been completed on a part-time basis to avoid becoming overwhelmed by competing professional and personal demands. Finally, prioritising my own wellbeing through regular exercise, time spent in nature, prayer, and being with the people I love helps keep me grounded, focused, and resilient.

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

To the next generation of female leaders, I would say: be patient and kind to yourself, and to those around you. Everyone is fighting their own battles—stay focused on what matters most, learn from difficult times, and keep moving forward.

You are part of an extraordinary global community. Do what you can within your own sphere of influence to work towards the vision that no child should die of cancer. It is an honour and a privilege to care for and support children and families through their darkest and most joyful moments—celebrate the meaningful work that you and your colleagues do every day.



# NATALIIA ONIPKO

## UKRAINE

Nataliia Onipko was born in a small town in western Ukraine, near the Polish border, into a family of journalists. From an early age, this environment taught her to observe people closely and to listen carefully to their stories. She studied philology and translation and, while still a student, began accompanying children affected by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster on rehabilitation trips to Italy. During this time, she witnessed how care, presence and solidarity can profoundly change the lives of a child and their family.

In 2004, she was invited to work as an interpreter at a meeting between Italian volunteers and doctors from the paediatric oncology department of the National Cancer Institute in Kyiv. That meeting became a turning point in her life. For the first time, she encountered children experiencing cancer and realised that she could not remain on the sidelines. She began volunteering at the hospital and later became a coordinator for the Italian foundation Soleterre, where she learned the principles of structured, professional philanthropy at a time when such expertise was largely absent in Ukraine. With the encouragement of her mentors, she went on to establish the Zaporuka Charitable Foundation

***If you want  
change in  
the future,  
become that  
change in  
the present***

**in Ukraine, while maintaining a close and lasting partnership with her Italian colleagues. Together, in March 2022, as Russian troops approached Kyiv, the foundation successfully evacuated more than 100 families to safety in Italy so that children could continue their treatment.**

**For more than 17 years, the foundation has been developing a comprehensive support system for children with cancer and their families. Its most significant initiative is the Dacha Family House—a home near the hospital where children can live with their families during long-term treatment. It is the first, and currently the only, project of its kind in Ukraine. Today, Dacha Houses operate in Kyiv and Lviv, and in 2027 a new one is planned to open in Dnipro, a key medical hub for children from frontline regions.**

### On Relationships that Influenced My Career

The first people who shaped my worldview were my parents. Both were journalists, and from an early age they taught me to pay close attention to human stories and never to walk past someone else's pain. In our family, conversations about social issues were a natural part of everyday life, as was the question of personal responsibility—what each of us can do to make things better. From them, I learned a lesson that has stayed with me ever since: indifference is also a choice.

A second defining influence came in 2004, when I met Italian volunteers from the Soletterre Foundation. I initially joined them as a translator, but I remained after discovering my true mission. They introduced me to a very different understanding of philanthropy—one that is structured, professional, and deeply rooted in respect for the dignity of patients and their families. This was not charity driven by pity, but a thoughtful system designed to empower people and support them during the most difficult moments of their lives. Over time, they became my mentors and long-term partners, and our collaboration has now lasted for more than two decades.

Equally influential were the parents of children undergoing cancer treatment. I witnessed mothers sleeping on chairs beside hospital beds for months, living with constant uncertainty yet continuing to fight for their children every single day. Their resilience helped me to understand that my role was not only to provide help in moments of crisis, but also to build a sustainable support system that can support families when their own emotional and physical resources are exhausted.

Finally, the children themselves have had a profound impact on me. Their ability to find joy in the simplest things, even in the midst of exhausting treatment, reshaped my perspective on life. They taught me to value each day and never to lose faith.

### On Challenges and Overcoming Them

The first major challenge was the decision to leave a stable career in the private sector and dedicate myself fully to philanthropy at a time when this field was only just beginning to take shape in Ukraine. There was no financial security, no established models to follow, and little understanding of how to build sustainable organisations. At the very beginning, the foundation's monthly budget amounted to just €50. Many people doubted that it was even possible to create a professional, transparent and systemically operating charitable organisation in Ukraine. This period was marked by deep uncertainty and personal doubt. Yet it was precisely during this time that I learned to make decisions without guarantees and to trust my sense of purpose. I discovered that leadership often means moving forward despite fear, guided by values rather than certainty.

The second major challenge was the creation of the first Dacha Family House—a home near the hospital where children can stay with their families throughout long-term cancer treatment. At the time, this concept was entirely new to Ukraine. We faced bureaucratic obstacles, a lack of funding and strong societal prejudices. There were widespread myths that cancer was incurable or even contagious, and that such a house should not exist near residential neighbourhoods. These experiences were painful, but they made it clear that real change requires not only building infrastructure but also transforming mindsets.

When Dacha finally opened its doors and the first families stepped inside, I realised that every difficulty

had been worthwhile. Seeing how the presence of family fundamentally changed a child's experience of treatment reinforced my belief in the importance of our work. These challenges taught me that meaningful change requires time, perseverance and faith. They strengthened me as a leader and helped me understand that even the most significant transformations begin with the simple decision not to give up.

## On Balancing Career and Other Life Responsibilities

What helped me to balance my career with other responsibilities in life was the fact that my family was never separate from my work. My husband and children were actively involved—volunteering, participating in fundraising initiatives, and supporting me during the most critical moments. Their presence made my work sustainable rather than overwhelming. I first entered a paediatric oncology ward while I was on maternity leave. Holding my own infant in my arms, I felt a particularly deep connection to the mothers whose children were fighting cancer. I saw their exhaustion, fear and extraordinary strength.

Motherhood deepened my empathy and transformed my commitment from a professional choice into a personal responsibility. A few years later, when my son was just one year old, we opened the first Dacha Family House. For me, it was never simply a project—it was about creating a place where other mothers could remain close to their children during the most difficult period of their lives.

I felt the strength of family support most acutely during the first weeks of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, when we were evacuating children with cancer abroad. My husband stood by my side day and night at the border, helping to carry children, load vehicles, and escort families to safety. In those moments, the line between my professional role and my personal life disappeared completely—we were simply doing everything we could to save children.

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

If I could give advice to my 25-year-old self, I would say: do not be afraid to trust your inner voice, even

when your choices may not seem obvious or understandable to others. It is often these very decisions that shape your path and define who you become.

Ukraine's war has reinforced this lesson for me. While evacuating children with cancer under shelling, I saw once again how essential it is to preserve humanity in the darkest moments. Beyond organising logistics and medical transfers, the most important thing was simply being present for families who had lost their sense of safety and stability. Sometimes, presence alone gives people the strength to move forward. Humanity is one of the core values of our foundation, and it is what gives true meaning to our work.

To young professionals beginning their careers in paediatric oncology, I would say this: if you choose this path, remember that it is not only about professional skills or expertise. It is also about your ability to become a source of support for families facing the most difficult experience of their lives, and to help them preserve dignity when the world around them feels as though it is falling apart.



# SHAHNOOR ISLAM

## BANGLADESH

Shahnoor Islam is Professor and Head of the Department of Paediatric Surgery at Sir Salimullah Medical College Mitford Hospital, Dhaka, Bangladesh. She is a dedicated paediatric surgical oncologist, working across both the public and private sectors. She is also the co-founder of the Children's Blood and Cancer Centre in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

She graduated from Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital under the University of Chittagong, and subsequently completed her residency in Paediatric Surgery at Dhaka Shishu Hospital. She later obtained an MS in Paediatric Surgery from Bangladesh Medical University (formerly Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University). Her commitment to paediatric oncology began during her residency, inspiring her to pursue specialised clinical care, research, and leadership in this field.

She serves as a national mentor for an international paediatric surgical oncology fellowship programme and works actively to strengthen multidisciplinary paediatric cancer care across Bangladesh. Through tumour boards, specialised clinics, education

**Strong women leaders transform vision into reality through action, resilience, and unwavering determination for future generations.**

**programmes, collaborative research initiatives, awareness activities, and advocacy, she bridges gaps between surgery, oncology, education, and health policy. Her clinical and research interests include Wilms' tumour, neuroblastoma, paediatric solid tumours, neonatal surgery, and complex congenital anomalies.**

**She currently serves as President of the Paediatric Oncology Group of Bangladesh and is an active member of SIOP, IPSO, and the American College of Surgeons. As Principal Investigator of national genomic studies on childhood solid tumours and a contributor to international collaborations with the University of Oxford and the NIHR Global Surgery Unit, she has authored more than 45 peer-reviewed publications and has contributed to the development of national childhood cancer guidelines. She was the lead surgeon in Bangladesh's first successful separations of pygopus and thoraco-omphalopus conjoined twins.**

**Her mission is to advance equitable, multidisciplinary cancer care so that no child dies from a treatable cancer.**

### **On Relationships that Influenced My Career**

Relationships have played a central role in shaping my career in paediatric surgical oncology, influencing my technical development as well as my values, resilience, and sense of purpose. Two groups, in particular, have been especially transformative.

First are my parents, my husband, Prof. AKM Amirul Morshed (paediatric haematologist and oncologist), and my mentors—Prof. Shafiqul Hoque, Prof. Mahbubul Alam, and Prof. Afi qul Islam. They instilled in me the values of compassion, integrity, perseverance, and professional excellence. Through their guidance, I learned not only surgical skills but also clinical judgement, ethical decision-making, and the

importance of teamwork and leadership. Their confidence in me encouraged curiosity, research, and lifelong learning.

Equally influential have been my patients and their families. Children with cancer and their caregivers have been my greatest teachers. Their courage and trust have shown me the profound human impact of our decisions and reminded me to see each child beyond their diagnosis. They have strengthened my commitment to compassionate care and to striving for the best possible outcomes.

Together, these relationships have shaped my professional identity—mentors providing guidance and patients giving meaning and perspective to my work.

### **On Challenges and Overcoming Them**

My career in paediatric oncology has been shaped by challenges that tested my resilience, compassion, and commitment. When I began, paediatric surgical oncology was a new concept in my country, and establishing a dedicated service was itself a major challenge. Essential anti-cancer drugs were often unavailable, supply systems were inconsistent, and there were no structured procurement policies. Through persistent advocacy, collaboration with institutional leadership, and strong teamwork, we gradually improved access to medicines and strengthened service delivery.

Another challenge was coping with the emotional burden of caring for children with cancer and supporting families through diagnosis, treatment, relapse, and sometimes loss. Early in my career, unfavourable outcomes left me feeling helpless and grieving. Over time, I learned to seek mentorship, engage in peer discussions, and practise reflective journaling. These strategies helped me acknowledge my emotions while maintaining healthy boundaries and avoiding burnout.

Working in resource-limited settings also meant confronting disparities in access to diagnostics, medicines, and supportive care. Instead of becoming discouraged, I focused on problem-solving, collaboration, clinical research, and advocacy for system-level improvements. These experiences taught me adaptability and strengthened my commitment to equitable, child-centred care.

## On Balancing Career and Other Life Responsibilities

One of the most important lessons in my career has been learning to balance the demands of paediatric surgical oncology with personal and family responsibilities. The combined pressures of clinical care, research, teaching, and administration can easily lead to stress or burnout if boundaries are not clearly defined.

Effective time management and prioritisation have been essential. Planning my work in advance allows me to focus on surgery, patient care, and academic responsibilities while still protecting time for family, self-care, and personal interests.

Equally important has been learning to set boundaries. Early in my career, I accepted every opportunity, but I later realised that saying no when necessary was essential to sustain quality work and prevent exhaustion. This has helped me remain fully present and effective in my professional role.

Support from mentors, colleagues, family, and friends has also been invaluable. Their encouragement and shared responsibilities have strengthened my resilience and enabled me to continue serving patients and families with empathy, balance, and dedication.

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

If I had the chance to offer advice to myself at the age of 25, I would say this: pace yourself and trust that growth is rarely linear. Cultivate patience and self-compassion. Early in your career, it is easy to equate your worth with productivity and perfection. You do not need to have everything figured out straight away. Seek mentors, ask questions without fear, and remember that saying “I don’t know yet” is not a weakness. Protect your curiosity and your humanity as fiercely as you protect your ambition. Burnout is not a badge of honour; rest and boundaries are essential for longevity and meaningful impact.

To the younger generation of professionals entering paediatric oncology, I would offer similar guidance, with an added emphasis on both privilege and responsibility. This field is profoundly meaningful and

equally demanding. You will witness extraordinary resilience and heartbreaking loss – both will shape you. Invest in interdisciplinary teamwork, because no one carries this work alone. Learn the science deeply, but never allow protocols to overshadow the child and family in front of you. Develop skills in communication, empathy, and self-reflection; they matter as much as clinical expertise. Finally, allow yourself to experience joy and hope alongside grief. Paediatric oncology needs not only your knowledge, but also your compassion, resilience, and commitment to lifelong learning.



# AZIZA TAHIR SHAD

USA

Aziza Tahir Shad, MD, is the Ellen W. P. Wasserman Chair of Pediatrics; Chief of the Division of Pediatric Hematology and Oncology; and Director of the Kara Amey Cancer Survivorship Programme at the Herman and Walter Samuelson Children's Hospital at Sinai, Baltimore, Maryland. She is Professor of Pediatrics and Oncology at Georgetown University School of Medicine and Clinical Professor of Pediatrics at the George Washington University School of Medicine, Washington, DC.

Dr Shad is Co-Founder and Medical Director of the ASLAN Project, a non-profit organisation devoted to building paediatric oncology capacity in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Through this initiative, she has established a replicable paediatric cancer healthcare system and fellowship training programme in Ethiopia.

Her clinical and academic interests include paediatric acute lymphoblastic leukaemia (ALL) and lymphoma, cancer survivorship, palliative care, and international oncology. She is an

*I look forward to the day that children from low- and middle-income countries will have the same chance of cure as children elsewhere.*

**active member of SIOP, the WHO Working Group, GICC, St Jude Global Alliance, PSPO, and other professional bodies. Dr Shad has delivered invited lectures at numerous national and international scientific meetings and is widely published.**

**She has received multiple academic, national, and international honours for excellence in teaching, mentorship, and global health work, including the 2024 Agent of Change Award from the Global Health Forum at the United Nations and the 2026 First National High Impact Woman Award from the Ethiopian Society of Pediatric Hematology Oncology.**

### On Relationships that Influenced My Career

The greatest influence on my life has been the encouragement and mentorship of my parents and husband, all strong advocates for education, particularly for women. Two additional mentors who profoundly shaped my career are Dr Ghaffar Billoo and Dr Ian Magrath.

Dr Ghaffar Billoo, former Chair of Paediatrics at Dow Medical College, Karachi, Pakistan, was one of the legendary diagnosticians of his time and a formative mentor in my career. He taught by example how to deliver the highest standard of ethical, compassionate, and respectful care in a low- and middle-income country (LMIC) setting, without being daunted by the overwhelming number of children who required care each day. Every child received his individual attention—an enduring lesson I learnt early in my career. At a time when no formal cancer care for children existed in Pakistan, he encouraged me to seek training in paediatric oncology abroad and to bring that expertise back to benefit children with cancer in the country. If I am regarded today as a humanistic oncologist, it is because of the communication skills, personalised care, and compassion I learnt from him.

Dr Ian Magrath, former Head of the Lymphoma Biology Section, Pediatric Oncology Branch, National Cancer Institute (NCI), National Institutes of Health (NIH), is internationally recognised for his pioneering work in paediatric lymphomas and for introducing

oncology care to LMICs across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. He was my paediatric oncology fellowship mentor and research supervisor at the NCI and beyond. He introduced me to global paediatric oncology and instilled in me the belief that every child deserves a chance. Together, we travelled to multiple countries, where I learned first-hand about the challenges of diagnosing and treating childhood cancer in resource-limited settings. I served as Paediatric Director of the International Network for Cancer Treatment and Research (INCTR) for more than ten years, studying disease biology, developing treatment protocols for paediatric ALL and lymphomas in LMICs, introducing supportive and palliative care, and educating physicians, nurses, and pathologists alongside Dr Magrath. It is his legacy that I honour in the work I do today.

### On Challenges and Overcoming Them

Two challenges—one personal and one professional—have profoundly shaped my life and career.

My career in paediatrics has been long and demanding, including three paediatric residencies and a Diploma in Child Health (in Pakistan, the United Kingdom, and the United States) before I began a Paediatric Oncology fellowship at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Despite excellent training in Pakistan, one persistent challenge was the need to repeatedly prove myself. When I started my residency at Penn State University, I was a young mother with a three-year-old son and a six-month-old baby, while my husband was completing his PhD four hours away at the University of Pittsburgh. During this period, my infant began showing signs of developmental delay and was ultimately diagnosed with a rare chromosomal disorder with an uncertain prognosis. The grief was overwhelming, but what sustained me was his resilience and determination as he reached milestones doctors feared he might never achieve. We grew together; he became my teacher. I completed my residency with honours. Today, he is an accomplished adult who continues to face challenges with the same determination that taught me never to give up.

My professional challenge emerged thirteen years ago, when I co-founded the ASLAN Project, inspired by the memory of two Ethiopian children with advanced cancer whom I treated at Georgetown University. We selected Ethiopia as our first focus country. As in many

low- and middle-income countries, healthcare priorities in Ethiopia at that time centred on malnutrition and infectious diseases, while paediatric cancer care was considered costly and futile. It took two years of advocacy, education, and relationship-building with the Ministry of Health, academic institutions, and physicians before the programme could be launched. Through resilience, focus, and the trust built with Ethiopian colleagues, we have since established a national paediatric cancer healthcare system, comprising four major centres and seven satellite sites; fellowship and nursing training programmes; graduation of thirty-five paediatric oncologists and hundreds of nurses; a national neuro-oncology initiative; TAPPCO family support homes; and the treatment of more than 11,000 patients to date.

### On Balancing Career and Other Life Responsibilities

It took me some time to fully appreciate the true importance of work–life balance. During my residency at Penn State, I had the invaluable support of family members who travelled from Pakistan and the United Kingdom to help. Fellowship training, however, was far more challenging. With three children and mandatory in-house call, balancing professional and personal responsibilities was extremely difficult. As a junior attending physician, the workload was heavy, and I often missed important family moments such as school trips and football matches. I told myself this was the price of commitment to my patients and to my profession—which, in many ways, it was—but it also came at a personal cost.

As my career matured, so did my perspective. I began to realise that getting home while my children were still awake did not diminish my dedication to medicine. I started attending the events that mattered deeply to my family and began to prioritise my own wellbeing. I trained in mind–body medicine, took up long walks, returned to reading, went to the gym, and practised quiet reflection.

Today, I am the proud grandparent of two beautiful grandchildren, whose arrival has transformed how I view life and relationships. I treasure family time and delight in simple pleasures. That sense of happiness and fulfilment carries into my professional life, where I am more present and grounded for my patients and their families.

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

If I were 25 again and just starting out, I would first remind myself why I chose paediatric oncology as a career: to honour a promise that, once I had acquired the necessary knowledge and experience, I would devote my time and energy to providing compassionate, ethical cancer care to all children—especially those in low- and middle-income countries, where survival rates remain unacceptably low. That would be my guiding purpose.

The road would be long and marked by challenges and sacrifices, sadness and joy, but each experience would teach me humility, resilience, and trust—qualities essential for building strong relationships with patients, families, and colleagues. To do this work well, I would need to maintain a healthy work–life balance, caring for myself and my family while caring for my patients.

To future paediatric oncologists, I would say this: you have chosen one of the most demanding paediatric subspecialties. Your patients will be your greatest teachers, and families will entrust you with what is most precious to them—their children. You will serve not only as an oncologist, but also as a primary care provider, counsellor, and advocate. You will experience profound sorrow when delivering bad news or losing a patient. You will also know indescribable joy when a child completes therapy, grows into adulthood, and invites you to their graduation, wedding, or the birth of their own child. You will witness courage and resilience in children that will humble you, and you will form relationships with families that last a lifetime.

Like me, some of you will choose to work in low- and middle-income countries; others will pursue careers in clinical care, research, or both. Whatever path you choose, strong mentorship is essential. Choose your mentors wisely. Do not allow early failures or obstacles to dishearten you. Remain focused, patient, and persistent—meaningful progress takes time. Invest early in your own wellbeing and establish a sustainable work–life balance. You will need this foundation to navigate the difficult days. Cultivate practices such as reflection, walking, faith, or mind–body medicine that ground you and help prevent burnout. And finally: never give up.



# SARA IBRAHIM

## ETHIOPIA

Sara Ibrahim has been working at the Addis Parents Childhood Cancer Organization (TAPCCO) since 2012. She played an instrumental role in organising the parents' group and developing its programmes. She initially joined as a volunteer, supporting the founding parents in a range of activities including reporting, fundraising, and awareness-raising.

Sara now serves as the Executive Director of TAPCCO, the only civil society organisation in Ethiopia dedicated solely to supporting the fight against childhood cancer. TAPCCO works with six public hospitals across five regions of Ethiopia that treat children with cancer: Tikur Anbessa Hospital, St. Paul Millennium Medical College, Jimma University Hospital, Gondar University Hospital, Ayder Specialized Hospital, and Hawassa University Hospital.

Under her leadership, more than 3,000 patients and parents have received support. Treatment abandonment has been reduced by 70%, and she has helped ensure that childhood cancer is recognised by the government as a key area for intervention.

**Learn from your  
mistakes, don't dwell  
on the past, and be  
optimistic in life.  
Live your life to the  
fullest, smile and enjoy  
the sunshine.**

**Sara Ibrahim holds a BA in Sociology and Social Administration and an MA in Regional and Local Development Studies from Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia. She has over 20 years of experience in community work and support. Throughout her career, she has worked with both local and international organisations, including USAID- and EU-funded programmes in Ethiopia, focusing on economic empowerment and other development initiatives.**

### **On Relationships that Influenced My Career**

Two people who have had a profound impact on my career are Dr Alula Pankhurst and Mrs Jo Killalea.

Dr Alula Pankhurst was my undergraduate thesis advisor and guided me in understanding and analysing people's challenges and lived experiences. My thesis focused on women who earned a meagre income by selling local drinks to support their livelihoods. His mentorship inspired me to pursue a career in development work and to dedicate myself to helping people in need. Through his exemplary life and guidance, he recognised potential in me and encouraged me to develop it. At a young age, I was fortunate to learn from him and to follow his guidance in community work. He taught me how to conduct research responsibly and how to engage respectfully and effectively with people and communities.

Another influential figure in my career is Mrs Jo Killalea, who was my immediate supervisor at Trócaire, an international Irish Catholic development organisation. I was a junior employee at the time, and it was my first experience working in the development sector. She encouraged me to engage with local partner organisations and supported my decision to volunteer during my annual leave. She also mentored me in project development, proposal appraisal, and fundraising for local organisations. Her humanitarian spirit, dedication, leadership skills, and the respectful way she related to staff made her a role model for me. She was a fair and principled leader who believed strongly in equity, ensuring that both local and expatriate staff received fair pay and worked in a supportive environment.

It was largely due to her encouragement that I decided to pursue a master's degree in Development Studies. I learned a great deal from her leadership and management approach, lessons that continue to guide me in my current role. I am deeply grateful to both of my role models for the influence they have had on my career and for the example they have set for my future work in development.

### **On Challenges and Overcoming Them**

One challenge I faced occurred at the beginning of my career while working at a private publishing company. I started in a junior position because I had no prior experience. Over time, I worked my way up and gained valuable experience. When a new position became available, I applied for it, but I later learned that it had been given to another staff member who had connections with senior management.

This was very disappointing, so I requested a meeting with the CEO. During our discussion, I explained my qualifications and contributions to the company. By the end of the meeting, he was convinced that I deserved the position. Shortly afterwards, I was appointed to the role. In that position, I successfully facilitated the publication of 14 books of international standard within a single year. From this experience, I learned the importance of standing up for my rights and advocating for myself. While there are many unfair situations in the world, it is important to challenge them and strive to make them fair.

Another challenge I faced was while working on a USAID-led economic empowerment programme, where I was the only female Programme Officer. I joined the team in a difficult environment, as the staff member who previously held the role had been dismissed due to incompetence but had maintained good personal relationships with colleagues. As a result, my arrival was not warmly received. I was given no formal orientation or handover. I received a new computer, but the hard-copy files were locked away.

When the head of the programme became aware of the situation, he provided me with the former staff member's contact details so I could request a handover. However, no one was initially willing to assist me. After two days, I was finally able to obtain the necessary files. I carefully reviewed the project documents, developed my own work plan, and began managing the responsibilities independently.

Despite the difficult start, the project became very successful. At one point, my supervisor even asked the male Programme Officers to learn from my approach. The key lesson I learned from this experience is that with focus, creativity, and a positive attitude, it is possible to overcome challenges and achieve success.

## **On Balancing Career and Other Life Responsibilities**

Balancing a career with other life responsibilities is always challenging, particularly in the type of work we do. In my role, I am effectively on call every day due to emergencies, donor demands, deadlines, and various requests that require immediate attention.

Although I maintain an overall work plan, I build in flexibility to accommodate unexpected and urgent tasks. Based on my work schedule, I also organise my other life responsibilities accordingly. I make a conscious effort not to take work home; the time I reserve for myself is dedicated to non-work activities.

Delegating tasks, sharing responsibilities, maintaining open communication, and fostering strong teamwork have all helped me manage my workload more effectively and create additional time for myself. Creating an enjoyable and supportive work environment through strong relationships and mutual care has also been very important.

In our culture, there is a strong tradition of maintaining relationships that feel like family. We support one another during times of crisis, joy, and need. Having such a supportive team has made a significant difference, enabling me to manage both my professional responsibilities and my personal life.

Overall, we maintain a shared understanding within the team and look out for one another, while always remaining focused on our work and responsibilities.

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

If I could offer advice to my younger self, I would encourage myself to spend more time on personal wellbeing and to learn to prioritise my own needs, rather than always placing the needs of my immediate and extended family first.

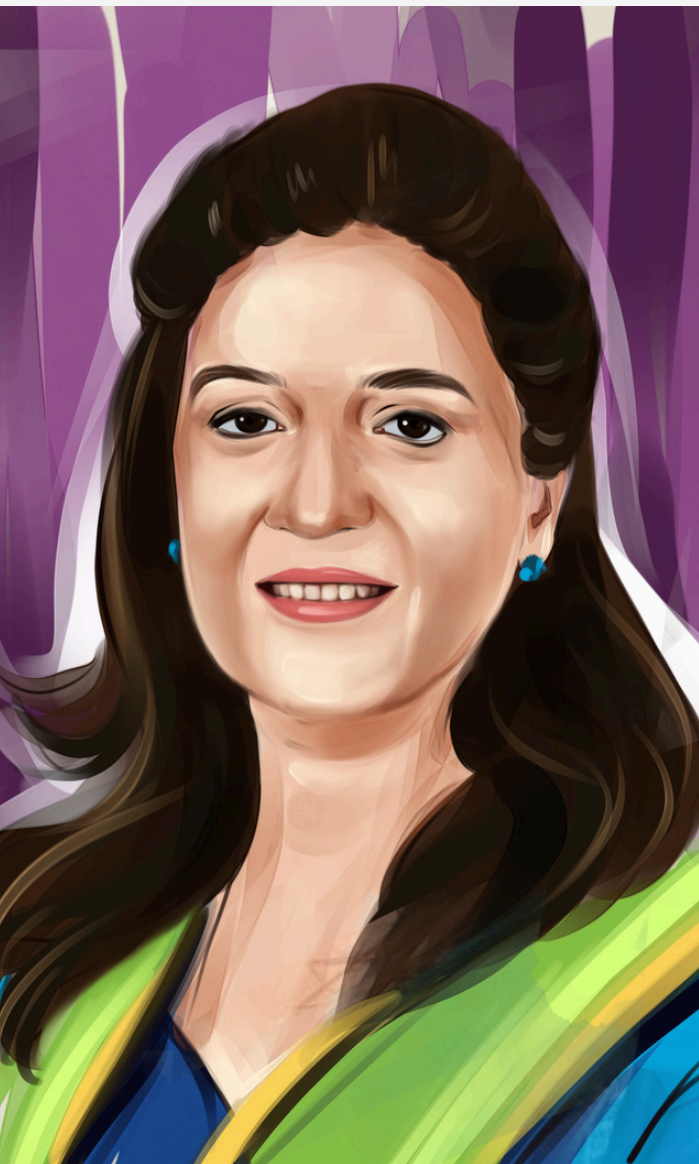
To the younger generation, I would advise being considerate towards colleagues, patients, and their families. Always try to understand the needs of children and their parents by putting yourselves in their position. At the same time, do not lose sight of your own wellbeing. Take good care of yourselves, plan your work carefully, and make time for rest and relaxation. Avoid taking work home whenever possible.

In our field, the lives of children and their parents can become closely intertwined with our own because of the long and demanding treatment processes. It is therefore important to learn how to maintain professional boundaries and separate your personal life from your role in the treatment process.

I would also encourage young professionals to pursue research aimed at finding less toxic and less painful treatments for cancer, particularly for children. Efforts should focus on developing cures and treatments that are accessible and affordable, so that families are not financially devastated while seeking care for their children.

When searching for solutions, think about the possibility that the outcomes could benefit your own loved ones or even yourselves one day. Treat everyone with equality, respect, and honesty. Do not focus solely on financial gain, because we are dealing with the lives of children—something that no amount of money can equal.

Knowledge and expertise should be used to reduce the pain and suffering of people, not simply for personal gain or recognition.



# ZEHRA FADOO

## PAKISTAN

Zehra Fadoo graduated with an MBBS from Aga Khan University Medical College, Pakistan, in 1991. After completing a one-year house job, she pursued a paediatric residency at the University of Chicago's Wyler Children's Hospital, followed by a fellowship in paediatric haematology/oncology at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, USA.

She returned to Aga Khan University (AKU), Karachi, in 1997 as a Senior Instructor in the Department of Paediatrics. Between 2005 and 2006, she completed a Diploma in Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics at Aga Khan University Hospital. As a faculty member, she received a Capacity Development Award and subsequently undertook additional fellowship training in Paediatric Bone Marrow Transplantation at The Hospital for Sick Children, University of Toronto, in 2010.

Professor Fadoo has served as both Undergraduate and Postgraduate Programme Director and established the Paediatric Haematology/Oncology Fellowship Programme at Aga Khan University – the first of its kind in the institute and in the country – where she also served as Director. She has also served as Section Head of Paediatric

**Success is not  
about reaching  
the destination  
but embracing  
the journey with  
passion and purpose.  
Create a legacy!**

**Oncology, where she played a key role in developing the clinical service and advancing the subspecialty.**

**In 2012, the Pakistan Society of Paediatric Oncology, a national professional organisation, was established, and she served as a founding member and President. She also served as Director of POEM (Paediatric Oncology East and Mediterranean Region Group).**

**She was promoted to Professor of Paediatric Oncology in 2017 and has had the honour of serving as Chair of the Department of Oncology since 2019.**

### On Relationships that Influenced My Career

While working at the University of Chicago, I had the privilege of witnessing the extraordinary commitment, intelligence, and profound impact of the work of Dr James Nachman and Dr Abelson. The state-of-the-art care provided and the cutting-edge research being conducted were truly remarkable. The possibility of cure and the comprehensive care offered to children with cancer were phenomenal. This experience made me realise the lack of specialised expertise in Pakistan and the immense need to develop such capacity in order to serve children in my own country.

Throughout my fellowship in paediatric haematology/oncology, Dr Del Acron and the faculty at the University of Virginia supported, facilitated, and nurtured my learning and career development. The relationships I formed with the children and their families became a lasting source of inspiration and reinforced my commitment to this specialty.

After returning to Pakistan and to my alma mater, Aga Khan University, the support of friends and colleagues enabled me to develop paediatric oncology services at AKU. Through the establishment of fellowship programmes, we were also able to build much-needed capacity for the country.

Seeing one's mentees flourish and further expand care and expertise has been deeply rewarding. A wonderful example is Dr Naureen Mushtaq, one of the earliest

graduates of our programme and a former mentee, who has made a tremendous impact through the development of a paediatric neuro-oncology programme in Pakistan. Being able to inspire, influence, and mentor individuals like her – who go on to excel and advance the field – continues to motivate me and strengthens my resolve to keep contributing to this work.

### On Challenges and Overcoming Them

Challenges are numerous, but the desire to achieve a goal requires perseverance and courage. One of the initial challenges was the lack of infrastructure and trained personnel. To address this, I developed a paediatric haematology–oncology fellowship programme to build home-grown expertise. The programme was initially established at the institutional level, and I worked diligently to secure its approval from the national certifying body so that trainees could receive formal national certification. The fellowship programme was launched in 2015 and approved by the certifying body in 2019. Since then, it has produced 45 graduates who are now working in hospitals across the country.

Alongside physician experts, it was also essential to develop a multidisciplinary team, including nurses, pharmacists, and dedicated clinical space. I worked with hospital leadership to establish and support paediatric nurse navigators and care coordinators who help families navigate the complexities of treatment. This has enabled care to be delivered by specialised nurses within a structured support system. Another major challenge was financial sustainability, particularly due to the lack of government or insurance support, with most families paying out of pocket for treatment. I collaborated with hospital administration and resource development teams to create support mechanisms through funds, donors, and welfare programmes. We organised fundraising events and used social media advocacy to raise awareness and mobilise resources. I also worked to convince hospital leadership to provide additional welfare support for these families.

In addition, I approached pharmaceutical companies to establish access programmes, which resulted in several expensive chemotherapy and targeted therapies being provided free of cost.

Through this journey, I have learnt that dedicated

work and determination are recognised and appreciated, even if progress may take time. When leadership recognises the sincerity of an effort, support often follows. At times, stubborn persistence is necessary to achieve meaningful change. These experiences have strengthened my confidence and resolve. I have learnt never to accept “no” as the final answer and encourage all my mentees to adopt the same mindset.

## On Balancing Career and Other Life Responsibilities

A loving and supportive family, along with wonderful friends, helped me maintain a balance between my career and personal relationships. Reliable household support, including dedicated house staff and a nanny, was essential—perhaps one of the real secrets to staying sane and calm while managing multiple responsibilities. A workplace that provided daycare also made an enormous difference, enabling me to continue breastfeeding and nurturing my two boys during their infancy.

The leadership in my department was very supportive of my personal responsibilities and recognised the unique challenges faced by early-career faculty members with young families. My mother, a deeply loving grandmother to my boys, was a constant source of reassurance and peace of mind, knowing that they were receiving the love and care they needed.

My husband has always encouraged my professional growth and never created any obstacles to my career. In fact, that was the only “prenuptial agreement” I jokingly made him sign! Being married into a family where the women were all career-oriented also created a supportive and understanding environment.

As my boys grew older, they began to understand the responsibilities of having a professional mother. Their encouragement became a source of strength that kept me moving forward. I suspect they also appreciated it at times—it kept me too busy to nag them and often too tired at the end of the day to harass them! In the end, it turned out to be a win-win situation and contributed to a happy family life.

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

Always have a sense of direction and purpose, and pursue your ambitions with commitment. Much can be achieved if you remain dedicated and honest with yourself and with those around you. Family must always come first. Strong relationships are essential, and finding the right partner in life is equally important. Career and family should go hand in hand to ensure both personal and professional growth, ultimately leading to a sense of fulfilment and contentment.

Your ability to deliver compassionate care and achieve good clinical outcomes is closely linked to a strong and balanced mindset. Paediatric oncology is a field that comes from the heart; therefore, only those who are certain of their goals and willing to devote themselves wholeheartedly to their profession should pursue it. At the same time, they must be prepared to face disappointments and setbacks along the way. The key is to keep sight of the bigger picture and to remember the profound impact this work can have on the quality and meaning of life.

One aspect I did not pursue as much as I should have, but now believe is very important, is developing another skill or interest outside one’s professional career—something that nourishes the soul. Whether it is painting, music, knitting, gardening, or sport, such pursuits are essential. We all need time away from work and moments of enjoyment to restore and replenish ourselves.



# ASYA AGULNIK

USA

Dr. Asya Agulnik is a paediatric intensivist and clinician scientist at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in the Department of Global Pediatric Medicine, with a joint appointment in the Department of Pediatrics, Division of Critical Care. Dr Agulnik received a BA in Biology from Harvard University, an MD from Stanford School of Medicine, and an MPH from the University of California, Berkeley. She then completed a residency in paediatrics and a fellowship in paediatric critical care at Boston Children's Hospital.

At St. Jude, Dr Agulnik is the Director of the St. Jude Global Critical Care and Euro Regional Programmes, which aim to improve care and quality of life for children with cancer globally through the integration of capacity building, education, and research.

Dr Agulnik is a clinician scientist with clinical expertise in paediatric onco-critical care and methodological expertise in implementation science. Her academic work focuses on the development, evaluation, implementation, and sustainability of clinical interventions to improve outcomes for hospitalised children with cancer and other catastrophic diseases worldwide.

**"Every system  
is perfectly  
designed to get  
the results it  
gets."**

**Edward Deming**

## On Relationships that Influenced My Career

Two colleagues have been particularly influential in my career – Paul Wise and Carlos Rodriguez-Galindo. I first met Paul Wise when I was a medical student at Stanford. He was my research mentor throughout medical school and my MPH, and was the first person to truly introduce me to responsible global work. He also shaped how I think about health disparities and how to partner with communities to create meaningful change. I have been privileged to maintain a mentoring relationship with Paul Wise for the past 20 years, which has naturally evolved as my career has developed. Perhaps the most memorable moment in our relationship, however, was in 2022, when I was leading SAFER Ukraine (the global response to support Ukrainian children with cancer and other blood disorders affected by the war). I called Paul on my way to Poland early in the development of our two-stage triage response. After listening to me, he simply asked, “Do you want me to come with you?” A few days later we were on the ground together supporting this extraordinary global effort. Paul has taught me what real mentorship is, and he also helped me realise that mentors can remain part of your life for a lifetime.

Carlos Rodriguez-Galindo, who built and directs both our Department of Global Pediatric Medicine and St. Jude Global, is the reason I am at St. Jude and have been here for the past 10 years. I met Carlos as a paediatrics resident, when I was still trying to determine what I wanted to do with my career. It was Carlos who encouraged me to pursue my combined interests in global health and the care of medically complex, critically ill children—two interests that I had struggled to reconcile as a trainee. Carlos also helped me to recognise the potential impact I could have by scaling my work through St. Jude partners. He taught me about intentional, authentic collaboration in global work and how to be bold about pursuing big ideas that can have a significant impact on children and their families. Finally, Carlos believed in my ability to build and lead a programme—because he believed in me, I began to believe in myself.

## On Challenges and Overcoming Them

Although it was a great opportunity, deciding to move to Memphis to start a faculty position at St. Jude was challenging. I had built a community in Boston and knew the system there very well. We had no friends,

family, or connections in Memphis. In addition, my husband had to leave his job and look for another one (ultimately, it took him a year to find a job he loved). Accepting the position and moving involved a big decision, with many uncertainties. I learned a great deal from that experience—to be brave and take calculated risks, to recognise and pursue opportunity, and to understand that you can find community anywhere. I am also deeply grateful for a supportive partner who was willing to take that risk with me.

Another challenge also comes to mind. The path towards my first independent investigator award (an R01 from the National Cancer Institute in the US) was rocky. The grant was led by me and Ginger McKay, an implementation scientist at Washington University in St Louis. We were both early-career investigators, and this was our first major award. Our initial submission did well, and we were encouraged to submit a revision. Unfortunately, the revised application scored worse than the original submission, which is very rare and quite disheartening. Ginger and I spent a great deal of time considering whether we should abandon the idea and start over, but ultimately we decided to undertake a major revision and resubmit the grant as a new application. On this third attempt, the grant scored very well and was funded.

This experience taught me that science—particularly grant funding—requires perseverance and a willingness to persist with an idea you believe is strong. It also taught me to take reviewers’ comments seriously and to be willing to make substantial changes; doing so ultimately strengthens the science. I can confidently say that the grant that was ultimately funded represented much stronger science than our first submission.

## On Balancing Career and Other Life Responsibilities

Examples of successful clinician scientists—especially women—who have the type of personal life I wanted have been extremely helpful. For me, I always knew that I wanted a family, and it was difficult to envision motherhood alongside a busy academic career. In my case, this also means a career that involves a great deal of travel, sometimes away from my family.

I am not sure that I have achieved perfect balance between my career and personal life, but I have been able to have both of the things I wanted: an academic

career and a family. This would not have been possible without a supportive spouse and colleagues who support and help one another. I also make a conscious effort to ensure that junior faculty have the space and encouragement to build the personal lives they want for themselves without compromising the type of career they aspire to.

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

At 25, I did not think I could have the type of academic career I have today. In part, this was because I did not see many examples of this type of career in my field. It was also because, at the time—and perhaps to some extent still today—there was a particular “type” of trainee who was seen as likely to go on to become a successful clinician scientist, and I did not fit that mould.

One of the most important things I have learned is that most of the skills needed to be a successful clinician and scientist are learned; they are not innate. No one is born a talented doctor or researcher—these are skills that all of us must develop in order to excel in these roles. Different people may need to focus on developing different skills, and these may come naturally to some while taking more time for others. However, there is no single “type” of individual who is meant for this role; in fact, having a diversity of people in science and medicine makes the field much stronger.



*In memory of*  
**CHERYL  
RODGERS**  
USA

**1967-2018**

**Accomplishments and Achievements**

At a very young age, Cheryl Rodgers, PhD, RN, CPNP, CPON, FAAN, knew her life-long passion was to help others. She earned her BSN from the University of Nebraska Medical Center in 1989, her MSN from the University of Texas Houston Health Science Center in 2000, and her PhD from Texas Woman's University in 2009. She moved to Houston after graduating in 1989 to work at MD Anderson Cancer Center. It was there that she met her husband, Eric. After leaving MD Anderson, she went to work for Baylor College of Medicine. Cheryl excelled at everything she did. She devoted her life to help children fight cancer. It was often said that her smile alone could cure anyone.

Cheryl joined Duke University in 2013 where she was an associate professor in the School of Nursing. Her research focus was paediatric bone marrow transplant patients. She served as a manuscript reviewer for paediatric and oncology journals and was a member of the Journal of Pediatric Oncology Nursing Editorial Board. She served as the Evidence-Based Practice Chair and member of the Nursing Discipline Steering Council within the Children's Oncology Group. She received numerous honors and awards throughout her career including being selected as the Top 20 Texas Nurses and the 2018 American Academy of Nursing Fellows. She had numerous publications and was author and co-editor of several Elsevier paediatric nursing textbooks.

**Believe in the  
power of using  
your voice to  
express what  
you believe in.**

## Balancing Career and Other Responsibilities

Cheryl knew how to separate her career from personal life and contributed 150% to each. Her love of family and friends gave her joy which is evident in her relationship with her husband, Eric. They found great happiness in being together and Cheryl made sure she took time out of her busy career to focus on her loved ones. Her exceptional organization skills allowed her to accomplish the goals she set, and she always considered the best way to balance professional life with her personal interests. She loved nature and spent time outside in her yard. Her love of bicycle riding provided a release from work stress, and she was in many bike-a-thons in Texas and North Carolina. Cheryl's advice to other professionals would be to find something you love to do and build it into your weekly schedule. She was a master at this, and it was one of the reasons she was so successful as a paediatric oncology nurse leader.

## Words of Wisdom to the Next Generation of Female Leaders

Cheryl would speak of the power of using your voice to express what you believe in. She was an example of being positive in every situation and working together to come to a common solution so that everyone would benefit. She found joy in all she did and spoke freely of following your passion while not allowing anyone to steer your future in a different direction.

Cheryl lived her life focusing on the good in others and always faced any adversity with grace and wisdom.

## Life Appreciation Written by Dr. Marilyn Hockenberry

# NOTES

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Established in 1969, the [International Society for Paediatric Oncology](#) is the only global multidisciplinary society entirely devoted to paediatric and adolescent cancers. With a steadily growing membership, SIOP currently unites over 4,000+ healthcare professionals and researchers working with paediatric patients worldwide. The community shares a strong common purpose: to increase survival rates, to improve quality of survival and to ensure care for all.



SOCIÉTÉ INTERNATIONALE  
D'ONCOLOGIE PÉDIATRIQUE



INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY  
OF PAEDIATRIC ONCOLOGY

