

Thrivin' (not just survivin') in Philadelphia

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News

In September, Dario Altieri (Figure 1), former chair of the Department of Cancer Biology at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, took on a new challenge when he was named the director of the Wistar Institute Cancer Center and chief scientific officer of the Wistar Institute in Philadelphia. Altieri has led a successful research career that includes the cloning of the gene Survivin, a member of the family of inhibitors of apoptosis proteins (IAPs). Altieri recently spoke to the JCI about his research and this most recent career transition. JCI: Can you tell us a little about IAPs and Survivin? Altieri: Survivin is a gene that we cloned in our laboratory in 1997. It's a member of the IAP family, but it does a lot more than inhibit apoptosis. It's required for cell division, for the proper segregation of chromosomes during mitosis. And importantly, it seems to be upregulated in almost every human cancer, so it obviously holds a lot of potential as a therapeutic target. Attempts to decrease Survivin levels in tumors or inhibit its function have led to . . . I don't know how many patents. JCI: How will being chief scientific officer and director of the Wistar Institute Cancer Center be different from your position (chair of Cancer Biology) at UMass? Altieri: I think the scopes [...]

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JCI: Can you tell us a little about IAPs and Survivin?

Altieri: Survivin is a gene that we cloned in our laboratory in 1997. It's a member of the IAP family, but it does a lot more than inhibit apoptosis. It's required for cell division, for the proper segregation of chromosomes during mitosis. And importantly, it seems to be upregulated in almost every human cancer, so it obviously holds a lot of potential as a therapeutic target. Attempts to decrease Survivin levels in tumors or inhibit its function have led to . . . I don't know how many patents.

JCI: How will being chief scientific officer and director of the Wistar Institute Cancer Center be different from your position (chair of Cancer Biology) at UMass?

Altieri: I think the scopes are broader and the impact is greater. I was the founding chair of the Cancer Biology department at UMass — and that was a great challenge. When I arrived, I had 24,000 square feet of empty lab space to fill. In just a few years, we were the number three cancer research program in the country. I learned a lot. This move to Philadelphia was an opportunity to take advantage of what I had learned and apply it in a new place. Wistar is undergoing the largest expansion in 40 years — we're building a new research tower — it's a \$100 million project. It's also in a unique location. We sit right in the middle of the University of Pennsylvania campus. Close to the Children's Hospital of Phila-

delphia. And there's Jefferson University and Drexel and Temple. My goal is to establish and foster long-term collaborations with those institutions.

JCI: What does a chief scientific officer do?

Altieri: That's a good question, I still need to figure this out. I think the mandate is to be an advocate, to promote growth and expansion of the entire research and training portfolio at the Institute, not just in the Cancer Center.

JCI: Did you bring your research group with you to Wistar?



Figure 1
Dario Altieri is the new director of the Wistar Institute Cancer Center.

Altieri: I did. I was lucky enough to bring 5 members with me — two of them senior. That should help us to . . . if not hit the ground running, at least ease the transition, and allow us not to lose too much time in our work.

JCI: You did your medical training at University of Milan School of Medicine. Do you still do any clinical work?

Altieri: I don't. The demands of providing high-quality clinical care and doing high-quality research are enormous. Being able

to do both is very challenging and requires a special person and a special situation.

JCI: Do you think your medical training influenced your research interests?

Altieri: Enormously. My work has always been focused on elucidating mechanisms with a backdrop of disease relevance. We always work to keep that bigger picture in mind, about how basic discoveries will be translated to help patients. I think my medical training fueled that tremendously.

JCI: Do you have a vision for Wistar, for the changes you'd like to see in the next decade?

Altieri: I do have a vision. There is one — in my opinion — remarkable asset to a non-profit research institution like Wistar. It obviously has this amazing history and longstanding tradition of being a place where many discoveries were made that eventually were translated into real clinical treatments. But the most remarkable asset is that it has a very clear, targeted vision: advancing science. So everyone working there can be dedicated to working toward making scientific advancement. It's that laser-focused vision that will allow us to make great scientific impact, to recruit new top faculty. I want Wistar to become a destination program, to create an environment that fosters the highest quality research and attracts the highest quality scientists.

JCI: So now that you're here, will you root for the Red Sox or the Phillies?

Altieri: This is an embarrassment. I've been in this country for 25 years, and I still don't know if the guy with the bat plays for or against the guy with the glove. Soccer I know . . . you know, we got a lot of advice when we were making the transition, but probably the best advice I got was from the auto insurance person when we were changing our policy. She asked where we were moving from, and when I told her she paused and then said, "Do NOT bring any Patriots paraphernalia with you."

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