



# Neil Spector, MD, Physician-Scientist, Mentor, Author, Dies at 63

→ **NEIL SPECTOR, MD**, a physician-scientist, translational research leader, and oncology mentor died on June 14, 2020. He was 63. Dr. Spector was the Sandra Coates Associate Professor in the Department of Medicine, Associate Professor of Pharmacology and Cancer Biology, and a member of the Duke Cancer Institute.

Dr. Spector joined Duke Cancer Institute and the faculty at Duke University School of Medicine in September 2006, after serving for 8 years as Director of Exploratory Medical Sciences-Oncology at GlaxoSmithKline and as Adjunct Associate Professor of Medicine, Division of Hematology/Oncology, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Dr. Spector's appointments at the Duke Cancer Institute include having served as Associate Director for Translational Research, Director of the Developmental Therapeutics Program, and Associate Co-Director of Clinical Research with the breast cancer disease group.

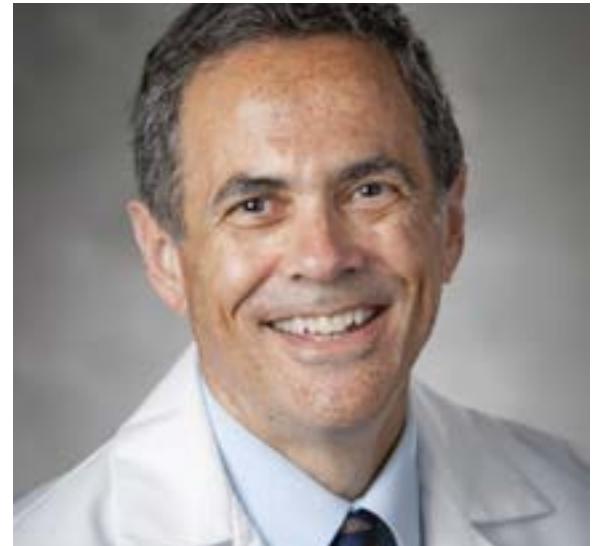
His laboratory research focused on elucidating molecular mechanisms of therapeutic resistance to targeted therapies and strategies to prevent and overcome resistance. Dr. Spector is credited with leading two molecularly targeted therapies to approval by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration: one for the treatment of pediatric T-cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia (nelarabine) and another for the treatment of HER2-overexpressing breast cancers (lapatinib).

## **A Mentor and Role Model**

**A MEDICAL ONCOLOGIST**, Dr. Spector most recently served as an attending physician and supervised medical oncology fellows at the Durham VA Healthcare System. In July 2016, he was appointed Inaugural Director of the National Precision Oncology Program at the Veterans Health Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, part of the Cancer Moonshot initiative launched that year.

"In that position, which he held for 2 years, Dr. Spector oversaw the program's expansion from a pilot project to a system-wide clinical service and research engine that has served over 12,000 Veterans and is the core of the VA's Precision Oncology learning health-care system," said **Michael Kelley, MD**, Professor of Medicine at Duke, Chief of Hematology and Oncology at the Durham VA Medical Center, and National Program Director for Oncology for the Department of Veterans Affairs. [At the time of his passing, Dr. Spector was serving as precision oncology consultant with the VA's National Precision Oncology Program and oversaw the VA Molecular Oncology Tumor Board.]

"Neil was so important to our fellows and residents," said **Kathleen Cooney, MD, MACP**, Chair of the Duke University



Neil Spector, MD

Department of Medicine. "In addition to being a great teacher, he was a very patient mentor and a wonderful role model."

## **A Generous Heart**

**AN ACCOMPLISHED AUTHOR**, Dr. Spector wrote *Gone in a Heartbeat: A Physician's Search for True Healing*, which was published in 2015. The book chronicles his courageous battle with Lyme disease, which went undiagnosed and untreated for years. Finally diagnosed in 1997, the disease ultimately damaged his heart, and in 2009, Dr. Spector received a heart transplant at Duke. A mere 48 hours after the surgery, he was walking 3 miles around Duke's cardiology floors. He would go on to carry out his own research into Lyme and other tick-borne diseases, most recently investigating a possible overlap between some of these pathogens and cancer.

"Neil was a compassionate physician and a creative scientist, always striving to develop new and safer ways to treat cancer," said **Michael Kastan, MD, PhD**, Executive Director of Duke Cancer Institute. "After his bout with the ravages of Lyme disease, he became a prominent spokesperson for that field, reaching the hearts and minds of all who read his book or heard him speak about his personal journey."

Dr. Spector earned his medical degree at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey in 1982. He completed his medical oncology and hematology fellowship training at Massachusetts General Hospital and Dana-Farber Cancer Institute/Harvard Medical School (1986-1989), where he remained on faculty until 1993, seeing patients and conducting basic cancer research. From 1993 to 1998, he served on the faculty at the University of Miami School of Medicine, Division Hematology/Oncology.

Dr. Spector is survived by his wife, Denise, and daughter, Celeste. ■

*This tribute was adapted from "Gone Too Soon: Dr. Neil Spector Passes Away," written by Julie Poucher Harbin and published on the Duke Cancer Institute blog. The full version may be viewed at <http://www.dukecancerinstitute.org/blog>.*

*In Memoriam*

Neil Spector, MD

*June 30, 1956 – June 14, 2020*