



Shelby D. Melton, MD, MS

The Optimistic Pragmatist

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Transformational pathology is more about attitude than behavior, but the two go hand in hand. An open mind is attuned to opportunity. Intellectual curiosity draws mentors. An inclination to collaborate creates professional partnerships. Pragmatism puts life experience to good purpose.

Shelby D. Melton, MD, MS, a staff pathologist at the Dallas Veterans Administration (VA) Medical Center, completed fellowships in molecular genetic pathology and gastrointestinal (GI) pathology at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas this June. His interest in molecular pathology was awakened at the Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta, where he was chief resident. The residency director at Emory was also director of the molecular diagnostics lab, and three of the eight residents in his class continued on to do molecular fellowships (“which tells you something about the program”). Pursuit of gastrointestinal pathology started as pragmatism (“everybody gets a colonoscopy at 50: that’s job security.”), but grew to be a passion during fellowship, when he worked with clinical and research experts in gastroenterology and GI pathology at UT Southwestern and the Dallas VA.

If you ask Dr. Melton about his professional development, he will launch into a litany of mentors (“You find people who inspire you and learn from them.”). There is the professor who taught histology when Dr. Melton was a graduate student in biology; the vice chair of pathology at Emory who invited the infectious disease team to round in the microbiology and molecular laboratories; the gastrointestinal pathologist and gastroenterology attendings at the Dallas VA who met with the fellows for an hour twice each month to “sit around the ‘scopes and have a powwow about puzzling cases”; and the researchers at Dallas VA who invited him to collaborate on grants and research papers from the start.

“I will be doing general anatomic pathology at the VA, so there will be a lot of physician-to-physician contact,” Dr. Melton says. He learned in training to contact the ordering physician when a test result is ambiguous or concerning. When that happens, he says, the next step is to pick up the telephone and say, “About that patient, what did you think? Here’s what I thought,” or “Come on down, I’ve got the slides. I’ll show you.”

“Whatever else we are, we should be the doctor’s doctor,” Dr. Melton says. “We need to have face-to-face, first-name-basis relationships with the clinicians who send us biopsies, blood samples, and surgical specimens.”

This profile of Dr. Melton would be incomplete without mention of his brother’s 2007 death from melanoma at the age of 36. Perhaps it was the pragmatism already described—along with a determined optimism—that enabled the Melton family to become active in the organization, AIM at Melanoma, shortly after his brother, Chris, was diagnosed in December of 2000.

“AIM at Melanoma has a great website (<http://www.aimatmelanoma.org/>), great resources, fundraisers, clinical trials, and many supporters,” Dr. Melton says. The website, where anyone can donate, features stories of those who have battled the disease, research updates, and a matching service for patients hoping to participate in clinical trials. They will sponsor nine patient and caregiver symposia in 2010 and 2011.

“We do the fundraisers and the walk every year in Dallas,” Dr. Melton says. “After my brother passed away, his friends organized one in Amarillo, where we grew up.” The family participated in their hometown walk on June 5, which netted more than \$9,000.

AIM at Melanoma has funded a computer-based program to educate primary care physicians, residents, and nurses on early detection of melanoma at UT Southwestern. The group convened the International Melanoma Working Group, whose members meet twice each year in the United States and Europe to share promising research and are collaborating with cancer centers in the United States to create a melanoma tissue bank. Aim at Melanoma lobbies for legislation to regulate tanning salons, include skin examinations on school physical forms, and require that members of the military and federal workers be given personal protective equipment and sunscreen.

Epictetus said it's not what happens to you that matters, but how you react to it. Whether the context is professional or personal, that remains a durable truth.