A CONVERSATION WITH
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BY GARTH SUNDEM

During Lebanon’s civil war, Sana Karam watched her grandmother boil water to sterilize wounds. She studied critical care nursing as an undergraduate at the American University of Beirut and as a University of Maryland grad student, caring for patients in Beirut, Baltimore, and Seattle. She then earned a PhD in physiology and biophysics from the University of Washington and was a postdoctoral fellow at Johns Hopkins before completing her MD and residency training in radiation oncology at Georgetown University. In 2013, she joined the University of Colorado Cancer Center, where she treats head and neck cancer patients and also manages a research lab. Here, C3 speaks with Dr. Karam about her work and the path that brought her to Colorado.

C3: How did your upbringing influence your path?
Karam: I grew up with very little, even basics such as water and electricity, in a nation that was being ripped apart by civil war. At one point, our family even had to flee our Lebanese village as refugees and cross the border into Syria, where we were cared for and welcomed by the kindest of people. There are now more than a million Syrian refugees living in Lebanon. It’s really heart-breaking. But tough experiences can strengthen you as a person and make you more empathetic with people going through situations where they feel powerless, because you understand what that feels like. I’ve had tremendous opportunities in my life and am very lucky to be in a position now where I can give back.

C3: You seem to be interested in both patient care and scientific research. As a researcher-physician, how would you describe the relationship between these two areas?
Karam: Both are driven by a desire to improve patient care. Many of my research ideas come from patient care. When existing treatments fail, you wonder why. What could have been done differently? Why does this cancer seem biologically resistant to this treatment? I also love working with people, helping them think through the options. In the lab we study cancer as a collection of defective cells, but in caring for patients we see how devastating it can be to people’s lives and families. If a certain course of treatment eliminates the tumor but also the patient’s ability to see or speak or swallow, that cannot be considered a complete success. Whenever possible, we must defeat the disease while minimizing any negative side effects and preserving a patient’s essential quality of life.

C3: You’ve only been in Colorado two years, but it sounds as if you’ve found ways to keep yourself busy.
Karam: That’s true. Juggling lab and clinic has not been easy. But the science is fascinating, and I enjoy working with people and being challenged. I also have three boys at home, ages 6, 10 and 13. But my supportive husband and I are making it work. And I love Colorado’s focus on nature and the outdoors. It reminds me of my childhood in the mountains of northern Lebanon overlooking the Mediterranean Sea.

C3: What frustrates you most in your role as a physician?
Karam: When things don’t make sense and people are being harmed as a result. I have patients with head and neck cancer, for instance, who continue to smoke even as we are trying to save their lives. I have others who can’t make it to their treatment because they have no access to transportation. Some can’t afford their medications. There are many other examples I could give you. Some of them involve policy, another area that interests me, but right now I think I have my hands full juggling the worlds of research and patient care.

C3: What do you enjoy most about your role as a physician?
Karam: When I can successfully treat a cancer, that feels terrific, of course. But even when an aggressive cancer has spread throughout a patient’s body and no treatment is available, I feel I can serve an important role by sitting down with patients and their families and helping them understand and decide among their options. The bottom line is that I genuinely enjoy caring for people and listening to and addressing their concerns.

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