Between life, death and hope

At a very young age, he left his home country with his family during the civil war to settle in Canada. Born in Beirut, his mother tongue is Arabic but he learned French in his childhood when attending French school in Ottawa. He studied English, the language of socialization in the nation’s capital, and even German in high school. “I’ve always been interested in languages; it’s a great cultural richness that broadens one’s horizons,” explains Dr. Sfeir. During his medical education, he studied in French and, as representative of the Office of Francophone Affairs, he took part in promoting the Francophone stream of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Ottawa, travelling to various cities across the country. “But later on, it was more difficult to keep up my French, given that resources are primarily in English and most of my residency was in an Anglophone environment. Over time, using English became a reflex and I was afraid of losing my French,” admits the young physician. Fortunately, meeting his life partner, a Francophone and French professor, brought him back to the language of Molière. “French is rooted in my identity, and it’s important not to lose that.”

This family physician, who first took a detour with residencies in radiation oncology and then internal medicine, dedicates most of his current practice to oncology. “I chose medicine because it’s a discipline that continually stimulates curiosity, but it was hard to know what specific direction to go in! I followed the path of my studies in biochemistry and my research in cellular mechanism, and by extension, cancer, which were subjects that really interested me,” explains Dr. Frédéric Sfeir, while emphasizing the opportunity to have an impact on patients’ lives and the health of the community. “My unusual journey, before completing my residency in family medicine, gave me exposure to a fascinating mix of various fields, building a skill set that I wanted to develop,” says this general practitioner in oncology, pleased at having been able to establish a practice that he is comfortable with. “At The Ottawa Hospital, where I work primarily on the oncology unit, many palliative care services are available, and communication is essential. There are a lot of emotions tied to a diagnosis of cancer. I’m happy to be able to talk with patients whether in French, English or sometimes even Arabic. Naturally, patients are more trusting when they feel understood and this promotes better patient management.”

As he embarks on his challenging career, Dr. Frédéric Sfeir also remains alert. “I’m on a quest, continuing to reflect on what motivates me, what I want to accomplish and pass along. I want to continue learning, sharing, and being involved – particularly with Francophone Affairs and the Francophone stream of the Faculty of Medicine, where I participate in cliniques simulées.” Surrounding himself with students in this way enhances his daily routine, creating a dynamic work environment that he could not do without. “The days are certainly longer, but so much more interesting! Oncology takes students into territory that can sometimes be difficult and humanely challenging, since it’s a discipline that goes hand in hand with death,” explains Frédéric Sfeir. The young physician wisely adds that this particular field requires a specific type of personality that necessitates being comfortable with one’s emotions. “In my case, I think that during my early years in Lebanon, when I was exposed to war, I learned just how precious life is, and this developed my sensitivity while also instilling in me a sense of hope that I still carry with me.”

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