



Meet the Oncologist: Mendel Warshawsky

M. Warshawsky, MD, recently joined St. John's medical staff as Chief of Oncology. Gazette sat down with him to learn more about what drew him to St. John's Episcopal Hospital.

Q: What are your major goals here at St. John's Episcopal?

A: When Maimonides Medical Center opened up a comprehensive cancer center, I was one of the first attending oncologists there. That experience has inspired me to duplicate that service here at St. John's. The idea is that the local community should not have to leave their home neighborhood to get convenient and quality cancer care. It's a lofty goal—local care that matches care anywhere else—but it's a worthy one.

Q: What does the oncology service at St. John's look like now?

A: It's a good and complete oncology service with an inpatient consultation and oncology clinic. We provide inpatient and outpatient chemotherapy services and we're able to coordinate for radiation services. We've got many of the components for a comprehensive service, but there is still some work to be done.

Q: How has your rabbinical studies influenced your work as a physician?

A: While I pursued my medical degree, I worked part-time as an associate rabbi. Among my many duties was visiting the sick in hospitals and at home. I really learned how to talk to people who are sick and to people who are dying. I came to value how to use family and spirituality, no matter what the patient's religion, to make a person's journey through this illness as tolerable as possible. I think because of these experiences, I have sought a lot of experience in pain management, palliative compassion care and end-of-life care.

Q: With your international background, is it a different perspective working in such a defined community?

A: I was born in London and as a baby moved to South Africa where I grew up. I spent several years in Israel, too. I met my wife when I was still a medical student. She moved to South Africa after our wedding where we lived for three years while I completed my studies. My wife, however, is from Far Rockaway. Even when we were living in South Africa, we'd often come back here a lot to visit her family. In fact, her grandmother spent the last weeks of her life at St. John's. So, when we decided to move to the States, we settled in Long Island near this community because it was familiar to us both.

My last position in Brooklyn also felt similar to this community—concentrated and local. The local angle of St. John's was a big draw for me. It's no small thing when you're sick to be able to be treated well and near home. I want to be that resource for this community.

Q: How else have you come to develop your philosophy about cancer care?

A: Both my wife and I have been personally touched by cancer and we have learned from our experiences that cancer is not purely a biological disease. The road to cure doesn't only involve chemotherapy, radiation and surgery, but also the love and care of family and community, as well as compassionate, empathetic and talented doctors and nurses. Our experiences have been a huge influence on my clinical outlook.