In Memorial: Uma Rao, MD

Uma Rao, MD was a cornerstone member of the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute (or UPCI, now the UPMC Hillman Cancer Center). Within a few years of the founding of UPCI by Ronald Herberman in 1986, she joined the Melanoma Program with John M. Kirkwood, MD. Together, they instituted weekly pathology reviews that rapidly became a focus of education and quality control for multiple studies of the Melanoma Program at UPCI, and for ECOG’s (now ECOG-ACRIN’s) Melanoma Committee after 1989.

Uma had boundless enthusiasm for melanoma and sarcoma pathology, teaching, and mentorship—serving as ECOG’s Melanoma Committee Pathology Liaison for trials E1684, E1690, E1694, E1697, and E2696, documenting the benefits of IFNα-2b alone and then in comparison or combination with the GMK vaccine in a series of pivotal adjuvant trials, including the recently published anti-CTLA4 checkpoint blockade trial E1609. Uma taught multiple generations of faculty, fellows, residents, and students at the 14-headed microscope and was indefatigable in her pursuit of molecular and anatomic pathology of melanoma and sarcoma. She collaborated widely with the leadership of the field, where her studies of ECOG tissue samples with Martin Mihm, Jr., MD established the role of micrometastases in primary melanoma using samples from E1690.

Uma Rao joined the Department of Pathology at the University of Pittsburgh in 1993 and worked as faculty until 2019. She was highly respected as an academic colleague. Her work in pathobiology and genomics of sarcomas and melanoma gained her respect nationally and internationally. She trained a large number of pathologists as residents and also through the Bone and Soft Tissue subspecialty clinical fellowship. Most of her clinical fellow trainees are now in faculty positions of their own. As faculty, she always had the courage of her convictions and clearly stated constructive solutions to solve academic and diagnostic delivery problems. She maintained a profile of courage and creativity, despite experiencing some very serious health problems.

In 2019, she transitioned to join the Gynecologic Cancer Center of Excellence (GYN-COE), one of three intramural Department of Defense-funded cancer centers, where she led the Research Pathology Center in the affiliated Women’s Health Integrated Research Center at Inova Health System—a key resource for the US Federal Cancer Moonshot’s Applied Proteogenomics Organizational Learning and Outcomes (APOLLO) research network. She died suddenly on April 7, 2020 and leaves behind her sister Jamuna Benjamin. She will be missed by all of her colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh and at ECOG-ACRIN, with which she continued an active dialogue in email through March of 2020.