

Ana Maria Lopez, MD, MPH, FACP

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"Allow every interaction to be a healing interaction."

"One of the most profound things we have to address as a society is death," said Dr. Ana Maria Lopez as she described what drew her to oncology.

From a young age, Dr. Lopez, Professor of Medicine and Pathology and the University of Arizona's College of Medicine, knew she wanted to pursue medicine. Both of her parents were pathologists and while at the time she didn't quite know what that meant, she knew she wanted to take care of people.

A talk she attended as a philosophy and political theory student during her undergraduate years put medicine in a larger perspective. She learned about Rudolf Virchow and the concept of social medicine. The dots started to connect.

"Medicine being politics – I thought that was profound. The healing of the individual. The healing of society. That's part of public health and I wanted to make an impact in both." When thinking about adult medicine, Dr. Lopez thought about the physical and psychosocial aspect of it. Oncology made sense.

In 1995, Dr. Lopez became the Research Assistant Professor of Medicine at the University of Arizona's Cancer Center. Two years later she was appointed Medical Director of both UA's Telemedicine Program and Women's Health Initiative. Today she is Associate Professor of Clinical Medicine at UA's Cancer Center and has been voted in "Best Doctors in America" every year since 2008.

She admits the path to where she is now wasn't "roses and bon bons." She advises prospective health professions students to be realistic about making plans and setting goals as well as being flexible in recognizing that these plans and goals can change.

"There are different possible trajectories and support them so that they could be successful," she said.

But Dr. Lopez is quick to add that this arduous path is "incredibly rewarding." Once she got to interact with patients medical school got better every year.

The commitment to the patient was something she learned early on from her parents. Doctors get busy and patients perceive this. The way to overcome that is to go to the interaction and really focus on the patient. "You really have to listen to your partner," Dr. Lopez said. The partner being the patient.

She pauses to think about her own interactions with her patients.

"How do you laugh with them? They all have cancer. We're all connected. We can see humor and humor is so healing. It releases so much stress. Allow every interaction to be a healing interaction."

It is this Zen-like approach to connecting with patients that Dr. Lopez finds nurturing, positive, and powerful. It is also how she knew medicine was right for her.

"To be able to listen to one's inner voice. It's got to feel right for you," she tells students. "It's more than a job. It's more than a paycheck. Because of that - I know if I were 20 again - that I would do this again."

As she looks forward in her career, Dr. Lopez knows that she wants to stay engaged with the Affordable Care Act, the impact of technology in medicine, and the concept of *team medicine* to maximize patient care in a coordinated way.

"It's a really exciting time in medicine." One that is inevitable to change.

"Change is always hard," said Dr. Lopez. "How it looks - we may not be able to conceptualize. I do want to participate in the change. It's going to happen with or without us - be at the table in making these policy changes. At the same time, it's really incumbent to help advocate for the patient.

"Ultimately, caring for the patient is a human-to-human interaction."