
Leslie L. Robison1 and Logan G. Spector2

With the death of Dr. Julie A. Ross, pediatric cancer epidemiology lost one of its leaders. Julie died of cancer on June 19th at the age of 54. A career-long member of the University of Minnesota faculty, Julie was Professor of Pediatrics and the Suzanne Holmes Hodder Chair in Pediatric Cancer Research, director of the Division of Pediatric Epidemiology and Clinical Research, and Associate Head for Research in the Department of Pediatrics. Beginning with her doctoral dissertation on the epidemiology of infant leukemia, Julie committed her career to expanding our understanding of the etiology of pediatric malignancies, as well as adult hematologic malignancies. Throughout her career, she exemplified academic excellence in research, leadership, mentorship, teaching, and community service.

The author of more than 150 peer-reviewed articles, 50 editorials, letters, commentaries, and nine book chapters, Julie was a major contributor to the field of pediatric cancer epidemiology. In collaborative research including John Potter and others at the University of Minnesota, Julie made major contributions to the understanding of the epidemiology of infant leukemias characterized by a unique translocation involving the MLL gene and providing new insights addressing why children with Down syndrome have a markedly higher risk of acute leukemia. In later years, she expanded her research to acute leukemia and myelodysplastic syndrome in adults as well. Maintaining an active research laboratory throughout her career, she was continuously considering the underlying molecular and biological mechanisms of cancer—blending biology and epidemiology. In support of her research and training efforts, Julie’s track record in securing extramural peer-reviewed funding was outstanding, including numerous R01 awards, a long-standing T32 training grant, and a recent K05 Established Investigator Award.

Because of the very nature of pediatric cancers, representing less than 1% of malignancies, collaboration in research is essential. Julie provided the required leadership, both within her own institution and nationally, to maximize the efforts of the relatively small and select research community focusing on the epidemiology of pediatric cancer. Through her leadership of the Division of Pediatric Epidemiology and Clinical Research and within the University of Minnesota Cancer Center, she directed one of the premiere pediatric epidemiology groups in the world. Moreover, between 2000 and 2009 she chaired the Epidemiology Committee of the Children’s Oncology Group, where she orchestrated a nationwide agenda for the epidemiology of pediatric malignancies.

Julie was an exceptional mentor to trainees at all levels. In addition to seeing eight Ph.D. and countless master’s degree students through graduation, Julie frequently mentored undergraduates as well as junior faculty. Her efforts to train the next generation of academics were recognized by the NIH, who twice awarded her a Pediatric Cancer Epidemiology Training Grant, and the University of Minnesota Medical School, who in 2010 awarded her the Carole Blard Outstanding Faculty Mentor Award. While focusing much of her efforts on academic research and mentoring, Julie maintained a strong commitment to service to her discipline, institution, and local community. Julie was twice a regular member of NIH’s Epidemiology of Cancer study section and served as Chair from 2011 to 2013. She was a senior editor at this journal for 6 years while also serving on the editorial boards of Pediatric Blood and Cancer and Cancer Research. At the University, she held numerous leadership roles, including Chair for Population Sciences in the University of Minnesota Cancer Center and Co-chair of the Promotions and Tenure Committee of the Medical School. Most recently, Julie was Associate Head for Research in the Department of Pediatrics. In addition to these roles, Julie was a longtime medical advisor to the local Children’s Cancer Research Fund.

Without question, Julie’s primary focus in life was her research. In contrast to her outgoing and ambitious approach to her research and academic efforts, she was relatively private about her personal life, including her decision not to share with many of her colleagues and friends the specifics of the illness that ultimately took her from us. However, those of us who worked closely with Julie, did know of her strong love and dedication to her family, as well as the joy she got from working in her garden. While Julie’s life was cut short, her legacy will live on through her accomplishments and trainees.

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