

## Perspective

**Cite this article:** Siranosian K. A conversation with Steven Pavletic, MD, MS, senior clinician, National Cancer Institute, Center for Cancer Research. *Journal of Clinical and Translational Science* 7: e88, 1–2. doi: [10.1017/cts.2023.29](https://doi.org/10.1017/cts.2023.29)

Received: 16 February 2023

Accepted: 16 February 2023

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# A conversation with Steven Pavletic, MD, MS, senior clinician, National Cancer Institute, Center for Cancer Research

Kathy Siranosian

Clinical Research Forum, Washington, DC, USA

## Top 10 Clinical Research Achievement Awards Q & A

This article is part of a series of interviews with recipients of Clinical Research Forum's Top 10 Clinical Research Achievement Awards. This article is with Steven Pavletic, MD, MS, Senior Clinician, National Cancer Institute, Center for Cancer Research. Dr Pavletic and his co-investigators study chronic graft-versus-host disease (cGVHD), the most serious late complication after allogeneic hematopoietic stem cell transplantation (HSCT). Dr Pavletic received a 2022 Top 10 Clinical Research Achievement Award for the development of pomalidomide in the treatment of chronic graft-versus-host disease [1]. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

### What first got you interested in a career in clinical research?

I received my MD and internal medicine training from the University of Zagreb School of Medicine in Croatia. Then, I completed a clinical fellowship in bone marrow transplantation at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, WA. Dr Don Thomas, who is known as the father of bone marrow transplantation, won the Nobel Prize my first year there and working in that environment was a real turning point for me. I realized how medical developments rely on clinical research and that if I wanted to be on the cutting edge, I needed to be involved in the research community.

### Where did your career path take you next?

From Fred Hutch, I went on to residency and a hematology and oncology fellowship at the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) in Omaha, NE, where I then served as the Director of the Allogeneic Stem Cell Transplantation Program. In 2002, I received an appointment at the National Cancer Institute (NCI) and an adjunct appointment at the National Institute for Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases at NIH. Now, I'm directing the NIH Chronic Graft-versus-host Disease (cGVHD) Study Group, practicing medicine and oncology and researching ways to cure blood cancers and treat cGVHD.

### When did you start working on the clinical trial to determine the safety, efficacy, and preferred dose of pomalidomide for certain people with cGVHD?

In clinical research, progress is incremental. When I was in Seattle and Nebraska, we understood that bone marrow transplantation can cure patients with leukemia, but we also knew about potential complications, including graft-versus-host disease. Essentially, it's a disease that happens when donor cells attack the recipient. Treatments for blood cancers have evolved and now we also use stem cells for transplants, but with the growing numbers of patients receiving them, we're seeing chronic graft-versus-host disease. Patients get cured from cancer, but then can be disabled for life from that complication. Since chronic graft-versus-host disease is a new disease in medicine, there is still much to be learned about why it happens and how to prevent it. Our clinical team to study this came together in 2002. At that time, there was no clinical research or trials because there were no tools to study or diagnose chronic graft-versus-host disease. Gradually, we developed methods to conduct clinical trials and measure response to treatments in a standardized way. So it took about 20 years to get us to the point where we are today and able to complete trials of new agents in cGVHD.

### How do you stay motivated when it can take decades for clinical research results?

That's a great question. I think you have to what could be called a fire in the belly, a desire to know the answer and to ultimately help patients. It's also very motivating to work with great teams – these are the people who help you keep going, pushing ahead to the ultimate goal. I always try to take advantage of opportunities to stay inspired and keep learning. A well-

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### **Table of Contents National Cancer Institute Report**

1. Understanding the eBook National Cancer Institute Report
  - The Rise of Digital Reading National Cancer Institute Report
  - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying National Cancer Institute Report
  - Exploring Different Genres
  - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
  - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
  - Popular eBook Platforms
  - Features to Look for in an National Cancer Institute Report
  - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from National Cancer Institute Report
  - Personalized Recommendations
  - National Cancer Institute Report User Reviews and Ratings
  - National Cancer Institute Report and Bestseller Lists

5. Accessing National Cancer Institute Report Free and Paid eBooks
  - National Cancer Institute Report Public Domain eBooks
  - National Cancer Institute Report eBook Subscription Services
  - National Cancer Institute Report Budget-Friendly Options
6. Navigating National Cancer Institute Report eBook Formats
  - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
  - National Cancer Institute Report Compatibility with Devices
  - National Cancer Institute Report Enhanced eBook Features
7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
  - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of National Cancer Institute Report
  - Highlighting and Note-Taking National Cancer Institute Report
  - Interactive Elements National Cancer Institute Report
8. Staying Engaged with National Cancer Institute Report
  - Joining Online Reading Communities
  - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
  - Following Authors and Publishers National Cancer Institute Report
9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books National Cancer Institute Report
  - Benefits of a Digital Library
  - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection National Cancer Institute Report
10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
  - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
  - Minimizing Distractions
  - Managing Screen Time
11. Cultivating a Reading Routine National Cancer Institute Report
  - Setting Reading Goals National Cancer Institute Report
  - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
12. Sourcing Reliable Information of National Cancer Institute Report
  - Fact-Checking eBook Content of National Cancer Institute Report
  - Distinguishing Credible Sources
13. Promoting Lifelong Learning

- Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
- Exploring Educational eBooks

#### 14. Embracing eBook Trends

- Integration of Multimedia Elements
- Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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