

## Cancer institute gains top scientist

A family history of cancer motivated a young Ben Neel, ANTHONY REINHART writes



ANTHONY REINHART  
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TORONTO -- Ben Neel learned his first science lesson at 8, and when he looks back now, through all he's accomplished in cancer research, it might have been the most important one.

It happened on the sparkling afternoon of Sept. 27, 1964, a day young Ben had hoped to spend at home, watching his beloved Philadelphia Phillies try to stop a bad losing streak and hang onto their unlikely first-place position.

Instead, his parents dragged him to the zoo, where, mercifully, he found a man with a portable radio.

"I said, 'Excuse me, mister, could you tell me the score please?'" says Dr. Neel, now 50.



When he heard the lopsided score, the boy was relieved, but only until the man made clear that it was the other team, the Milwaukee Braves, that was in the lead. The Phillies, who'd had everyone's hopes up all year, went on to finish the season in second.

"I think it's the ability to withstand that kind of disappointment that stands me in good stead in science," says Dr. Neel, who arrived in Toronto from Boston this week, eager and ready to take on directorship of the Ontario Cancer Institute at Princess Margaret Hospital.

As a result, Dr. Neel's former colleagues at Harvard Medical School will be left to withstand some disappointment of their own as he becomes the latest top-tier American scientist to follow the lure of Toronto's flourishing biomedical research community.

OCI is also in the final stages of recruiting Gordon Keller, a leading stem-cell researcher from New York's Mount Sinai School of Medicine, and Gang Zheng, a University of Pennsylvania expert on molecular imaging, a new way to look inside the body and see, at the level of individual molecules, how diseases behave and how treatment affects them.

In addition, Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre announced last week that Harvard physicist Kullervo Hynynen will serve as its new director of imaging research.

The appointments are part of a recent brain gain for Canada that includes Nobel laureate physicist Carl Wieman, who left the University of Colorado at Boulder for the University of British Columbia.

In Dr. Neel's case, three factors sealed the deal, after about a year of courtship that included several visits and counteroffers in Boston, which he still calls the mecca of biomedical research in the West.

First was the chance to make a bigger mark, since "some of the science that's going on here, in particular the work on stem cells and tumour stem cells, is potentially going to impact cancer biology substantially over the next 10 years," he says.

Second, the U.S. government, over the past decade, has begun "basically picking winners and spending large amounts of money on big projects that aren't necessarily going to be as effective as the large amount of independent research funded in the past," Dr. Neel says.

Toronto itself was the final selling point. "You don't have to be very observant," he says. "Everywhere you

turn there's new buildings, there's a lot of excitement here."

Alongside the skyscrapers, Toronto's wealthy have been busy building their legacies with major donations to the city's research hospitals, making it that much easier for them to compete for top talent.

The University Health Network, which governs Princess Margaret, Toronto General and Toronto Western hospitals, will soon announce that a five-year fundraising campaign for research has raised \$550-million, well beyond its \$400-million target, says Bob Bell, the network's president and chief executive.

Dr. Neel's appointment to head the cancer institute reflects the expansion made possible by those dollars, since oversight of research at the three hospitals previously fell entirely to senior scientist Chris Paige.

As a bonus, Dr. Neel is "a very charismatic leader" who is not only a top scientist, but an experienced medical doctor who, while no longer practising, "understands how the integration of clinical care and science needs to happen," Dr. Bell says.

He is also "the kind of guy you'd like to go out for a beer and watch a football game with," although Dr. Neel himself presents more like a science-fair winner than a star quarterback.

"I sort of think of myself as 15," he says, looking out from behind dark, large eyeglasses. "I definitely don't think of myself as 50, except when I'm running."

Dr. Neel's youthful, self-deprecating manner might be partly explained by humble beginnings in Philadelphia, as the son of parents who divorced soon after his birth in 1956.

"I'm the only kid I knew who grew up in a divorced household in those days," says the married father of three daughters, 23, 16 and 12, "and my kids are among the only kids that they know who didn't."

Long before Dr. Neel was born, the grandfather after whom he is named, Benjamin Dortch, died of cancer, leaving his widow, Ida, to take over the couple's knitting mill.

"I was pretty close to my grandmother," he says, adding Ida Dortch pitched in to help raise him while his mother worked as a bookkeeper. Then, at 78, she died of cancer.

Ben, 17 at the time and already interested in biology, had found a personal motivation to pursue cancer research. He studied biology at Cornell University and then earned a doctorate at Rockefeller University, both in New York State.

"We really knew nothing, when I started graduate school, about cancer," he says. "There were still basic questions like, 'What is cancer? Is it a genetic disease? Is it caused by viruses?' I mean, these things were completely unknown, and what's happened in the last 30 years has been nothing short of miraculous in terms of our basic understanding."

And that, too, helps to explain why Dr. Neel feels 15 instead of 50; why he still wakes up at night with ideas, hoping he remembered to keep a note pad by the bed.

"That's why I think most people like me are very optimistic about serious strides," Dr. Neel says. "I probably shouldn't say this because I've already lost this bet once, but I'd be very surprised if, 20 years from now, almost all major cancers were not curable."

Getting there will take untold thousands more hours at lab benches around the world, including those now under Dr. Neel's watch.

Between the triumphs and disappointments, he plans to enjoy the occasional ball game, as well as the odd play in Stratford or Niagara-on-the-Lake, but in a field that he admits can be all-consuming, such distractions are

likely to be brief.

"I want things to go faster," he says. "I want to know the answer."

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