

A “Force of Nature” in Skin Cancer Research

MED’s Marie-France Demierre was a tireless advocate of sun safety

By Ellen Berlin

Marie-France Demierre, a School of Medicine professor of dermatology and medicine and director of the Skin Oncology Program in Dermatology at Boston Medical Center, died unexpectedly on April 13, 2010. She was forty-three.

An internationally recognized clinical expert in the management of melanoma, Demierre knew the disease’s toll. As a tireless advocate of skin cancer prevention and awareness, she worked to ensure that others never would.

Demierre, a rising star in her field, was especially dedicated to public education regarding safe sun practices, as well as to patient quality of life. She wrote extensively and traveled the world to lecture on both topics.

“Dr. Demierre was an exceptionally talented colleague who brought tremendous passion to her work and cared deeply about her patients,” says Rhoda Alani, MED’s Herbert Mescon Professor and Chair of Dermatology and dermatologist-in-chief at Boston Medical Center. “She was that rare academician who excelled as a clinician, educator, and scholar. It is tragic to have lost someone with so much talent and promise so early on in her career.”

For many years, Demierre led the BU Medical Center’s annual skin cancer screening and volunteered for the annual screening of members of the Boston Red Sox, where she discovered numerous early malignancies and

likely saved lives. She testified many times before the Massachusetts legislature in favor of stricter regulations for the indoor tanning industry and helped document the increase in melanomas among young women who had used tanning beds. She pioneered educational programs for mothers of newborns and young children about the lifelong risks of unprotected sun exposure.

In 2009, Demierre received the President’s Award from the Women’s Dermatologic Society for her efforts to raise awareness of sun safety, skin cancer, and melanomas. She also was honored in 2009 by the Boston Red Sox as a Medical All Star for her tireless community work promoting sun safety to children, teens, and their parents.

Demierre earned a medical degree and received her clinical training in medicine and dermatology at McGill University. She came to BUMC for a skin oncology fellowship in 1995

and was recruited to head the Skin Oncology Program in 1997. As director of the program, she developed and expanded a highly regarded service for the care of melanoma patients and a photopheresis program for patients with cutaneous T-cell lymphoma (a cancer targeting white blood cells in the skin) and related disorders.

Howard Koh, a former School of Public Health and MED professor and current U.S. Department of Health and Human Services assistant secretary for health, recruited Demierre in 1997, when she was only thirty-one. “At a young age, Dr. Demierre rose to become a recognized national leader in skin oncology,” says Koh (SPH’95). “With tremendous energy, she tirelessly cared for patients and sought innovative and life-saving treatments for each and every one of them. We are shocked by her passing, but also enormously grateful for her life of inspiration and passion.”



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