Remembering the Life and Work of Robert J. Arceci, MD, PhD

Born: May 22, 1950 in Winchendon, MA

Died: June 8, 2015 in Scottsdale, AZ

Laid to rest in Winchendon, MA
Robert J. Arceci, MD, PhD, a nationally prominent pediatric hematologist/oncologist and cancer researcher was born May 22, 1950 in Winchendon, MA. He died June 8, 2015 in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Dr. Arceci joined Phoenix Children's in late 2012 as Co-Director of the Ronald A. Matricaria Institute of Molecular Medicine and held the dual role of Division Chief for the Phoenix Children's Center for Cancer and Blood Disorders. He also served as a professor of Pediatrics on the faculty at the University of Arizona College of Medicine-Phoenix, Department of Child Health. His contributions at both institutions will be sorely missed.

As Division Chief of the Center for Cancer and Blood Disorders at Phoenix Children's, Dr. Arceci led a team of more than 100, including physicians, nurses, social workers, nutritionists, Child Life and psychosocial staff, clinical researchers and administrative support staff in the Center's outpatient clinic and inpatient floor. His expertise, commitment to excellence, and support of the staff made him a popular leader.

In addition to this leadership role, Dr. Arceci was an excellent clinician, known both nationally and internationally. Some of his patients traveled from across the United States, Europe and the Middle East. He was considered one of the world’s experts on histiocytic disorders and pediatric acute myelocytic leukemia (AML). Parents admired his gentle and encouraging manner with their children. They also appreciated his honesty and helpfulness as they faced their child’s difficult diagnosis.

His quick grin, distinctive laugh and playful spirit lived alongside a warrior’s spirit. He applied his intense drive to find new and novel approaches to treating and even eradicating pediatric cancer. With messy diagrams on the back of a napkin he could explain the purpose and process of personalized medicine to a science novice.

In his laboratory, located on the campus of Translational Genomics (TGen) Institute, he worked with eight scientists. He is most noted for his research in molecular medicine as a precision treatment for pediatric leukemia. His research was based on the belief that a new approach was needed to accelerate the discovery of cures for children and adolescents with cancer. He sought novel and effective approaches to unlock genetic codes and develop drug therapies in real time to improve the outcome of these young patients.

In 2013, Dr. Arceci was awarded a $1 million, two-year grant from the St. Baldrick’s Foundation to study new treatments for childhood cancer. The team has identified important changes in AML that can be exploited to develop more effective and less toxic treatments using new types of drugs. His work has helped identify novel genetic changes in the cancers of patients that have led to their treatment with specific, targeted treatments.

Through his body of work, Dr. Arceci was well known and highly respected in the worldwide scientific community. Most recently, he held leadership roles with the National Cancer Institute on Pediatric Leukemia and Lymphoma, Children's Oncology Group (COG), Leukemia and Lymphoma Society and the St. Baldrick’s Foundation. He was also the chairman of the COG AML Strategy Committee.

Previously, he was a founding board member of the Alex Lemonade Stand Foundation, chaired the NCI Pediatric Leukemia and Lymphoma Committee, was a member of the National Clinical Trials Network Committee and a board member of the PDQGov committee that writes and publishes treatment summaries for all childhood cancers.

Additionally, Dr. Arceci served as Chairman of the Nikolas Symposium Committee that organizes an international meeting each year on the Histiocytic Disorders and was past president of the American Society of Pediatric Hematology/Oncology.

Dr. Arceci’s research has been published in a multitude of manuscripts, textbooks and grants. He was the founding editor and served the last ten years as Editor-in-Chief of Pediatric Blood and Cancer, the official journal of the American Society of Pediatric Hematology/Oncology (ASPHO) and the Society International of Pediatric Oncology (SIOP), the principal pediatric hematology/oncology journal worldwide. He also served as editor of several textbooks, including Pediatric Hematology.

Both for his daily commute and weekend getaways, Dr. Arceci loved to ride his motorcycle and was active in the riding community. He became something of a local celebrity on rides that raised funds for children’s cancer programs or research. He was a lead rider for Bob's Biker Bash, an annual event for Phoenix Children's. He also made friends at the Grand Canyon University Relay for Life, a run to raise funds to fight cancer at Phoenix Children's. He delighted in seeing former patients at this event and they loved to see him outside the clinic.

Dr. Arceci has always demonstrated a commitment to the psycho-social needs of children and families facing cancer. This story was captured for the big screen when he originated the Emmy Award-winning movie A Lion in the House (2006), which follows the stories of five children and their families as they battle pediatric cancer. From the trauma of diagnosis to the physical toll of treatment, the six-hour film series documents the stresses that can tear a family apart as well as the courage of children facing the possibility of death with honesty, dignity and humor.

Prior to joining Phoenix Children's, Dr. Arceci served as the King Fahd Professor of Pediatric Oncology and co-director of the Michael Garil Leukemia Survivors Program at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, where he had previously served as director of pediatric oncology. Before that, he was director of pediatric hematology/oncology at Cincinnati Children's Hospital and was on the faculty at Harvard Medical School, the Dana Farber Cancer Institute and Boston Children's Hospital.

Dr. Arceci earned a bachelor's degree from Trinity College, and doctorate and medical degrees from the University of Rochester. He completed his residency in pediatrics and fellowship in pediatric hematology/oncology at Boston Children’s Hospital and the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. Dr. Arceci leaves behind his wife of nearly 43 years, Jean, and sons John and Andrew, along with their fiancés Denise and Asako, respectively. He will be laid to rest in his hometown of Winchendon, MA. No further services are pending at this time. A celebration of his life and work is planned for September, Pediatric Cancer Awareness Month, in Phoenix, AZ.

Friends and colleagues who wish to honor Dr. Arceci and help continue his work are invited to support the new home for the Phoenix Children's Center for Cancer and Blood Disorders that is in design now. Within this beautiful new space we will pay tribute to Dr. Arceci, who was a vocal champion for the project and especially for the children and families who will be treated there. For more information, the family has asked that you please contact the Phoenix Children's Hospital Foundation at (602) 933-4483.