

faculty profile



Hayes finds the physician-scientist role a rewarding path

Neil Hayes, MD, MPH, loves both parts of his job — even though they can be very different experiences day to day. Some days, he helps lead national teams of scientists reporting groundbreaking molecular analyses of cancers. Other days, he sees head and neck cancer patients at the N.C. Cancer Hospital.

A pragmatic physician/scientist, Dr. Hayes explains,

“In the lab, the first thing we try to do is identify problems that are relevant for large numbers of patients or problems for particular patients that look as though they might have a potential solution. The lab work is very informed by the relevance that I bring home from patient care every week.”

“I found myself connecting with the head and neck cancer patients. This cancer is challenging, and UNC has a great team led by Dr. Mark Weissler, one of my surgical mentors and a great doctor.”

Dr. Hayes is also involved in The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA), a scientific network funded by the

National Institutes of Health. Scientific teams, including UNC’s, have recently reported new molecular analyses of several tumor types, including breast, lung and colon cancers. Their findings will shape current and future cancer therapy.

Hayes believes that one key to UNC’s successful grant application to become part of TCGA was the University Cancer Research Fund. “UCRF is filling a critical niche for us at UNC. We’ve got great scientists, we’ve got great minds, but no matter how great your science is, there are very few opportunities to build infrastructure of science: the technology that allow us to ask questions with the newest tools.”

“There are not many ways to do that unless you have institutional support. One of the institutions we can turn to is the citizens of the state of North Carolina through our government. We’ve asked if cancer research important to North Carolina, and the citizens in our legislatures have said that cancer research is important for many reasons, and they’ve supported it. We feel a sacred trust to create a return on that investment.”

Dr. Hayes chose to join the UNC faculty in 2004. “I’m from North Carolina, so that was a draw. What’s special about UNC is it’s one of the few places where

you have everything you need in terms of working environment and facilities, and there is wiggle room for you to establish yourself in a niche and develop your own career. It’s a really unique place.”

For Dr. Hayes “the best part of being a scientist is the people. Here at UNC, it’s the leadership we have for the cancer center in clinical fields, the wonderful scientists across the country who we collaborate with, and our patients.”

And of his clinical practice, he says, “There are so many rewarding aspects of being a physician, but I certainly like the fact that at the end of the week I almost always feel like something that I did was relevant and made a difference to somebody, and that’s very rewarding.”

Dr. Hayes is a Davidson graduate, a UNC School of Medicine graduate and completed a Masters in Public Health at Harvard University, an internship at Boston University School of Medicine, a clinical fellowship at Tufts University Medical Center and a postdoctoral fellowship at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute.

Dr. Hayes and his wife, Dr. Liza Makowski, an assistant professor of nutrition in the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health and member of UNC Lineberger, have two sons and live in Chapel Hill. 🐾