

A shared mission to take on the “impossible” in cancer research

By [Veronica Meade-Kelly](#) | Jun 14, 2022

Like many cancer biologists, Shiva Malek was inspired to pursue a career in oncology after witnessing the effects of the disease first-hand. While studying structural biology in graduate school, she learned that a close friend had been diagnosed with breast cancer at just 25 years old. Malek remembers thinking about how life-changing the diagnosis might be: would her friend, enrolled in medical school, have to withdraw and put off her dream of becoming a doctor?

The answer was no – her friend bravely endured the disruption of cancer treatment amid the challenges of medical school, doing her best to live her life “as normal.” That choice left an impression. “As my career progressed,” Malek explains, “I realized I wanted to make it easier for patients to choose to continue living their normal lives.”

As the Global Head of Oncology at Novartis Institutes for BioMedical Research (NIBR) – a position she took up in October of 2021 – Malek leads a team that shares her mission to make transformative medicines with the potential to improve outcomes and quality-of-life for patients with cancer. Newly settled into the role, she sat down to talk about the strategic direction of Oncology at NIBR and her excitement about Novartis science, and to share her observations about being the first woman to hold the position.

What inspired you to come to NIBR?

There were many things that drew me. The first is the longstanding history that Novartis and NIBR have in innovation and doing fantastic science. I was jumping out of my seat to be able to interact with the scientists here. The second is that, at the leadership level, there was an opportunity to work with a dream team of cancer biologists and leaders including Jay Bradner and [Vas Narasimhan](#), and partners like [Alice Shaw](#) and [Glenn Dranoff](#). I also appreciate the commitment to patients that this entire organization has. I share that commitment. That’s why I’m here: to develop medicines and make a difference in patients’ lives.

What to your mind makes Novartis cancer research stand out?

I would say courage. I see this organization and scientists here tackling challenges that frankly in many other organizations were deemed impossible.



What direction will NIBR Oncology be taking with you at the helm?

Our strategy will continue to be grounded in innovative science, but there are three main areas that we're focusing on. The first is strengthening our leadership in disease biology, particularly in indications where we have already made an impact in patients' lives. By that I mean we want to really understand those medicines from a translational aspect – how our patients respond or possibly develop resistance to our therapies. Then we want to use those learnings to iterate and inform our research.

Second, cancer is a tough disease to tackle. If we really want to make a dent in treating it we have to take on the biggest challenges in oncology: coming up with novel approaches to drug resistance, for example, and figuring out how to target the large numbers of known cancer drivers such as transcription factors that are incredibly difficult to drug.

And that brings us to the third part of the strategy, which involves realizing the full potential of the groundbreaking technology platforms that we've invested in. This includes radioligand therapies, antibody drug conjugates, cell and gene therapies. We have a really deep understanding of many of these technology platforms and we want to leverage that expertise to solve these tough challenges in oncology that I described.

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- Shiva Malek

You're the first woman to lead NIBR Oncology. What can you say about the experience so far?

What's truly unique is that I am leading the NIBR Oncology Disease Area alongside Alice Shaw [Head of Translational Medical Oncology at NIBR]. Obviously, there are other cancer leaders here – it's not just me and Alice – but I can say that the chance to lead Oncology ²⁰ alongside another woman, and one for whom I have

tremendous respect, was definitely appealing to me. It did occur to me when I joined that I would be the first woman in this seat, which can come with its own challenges, but it's been refreshing and fun, too, to play that role. I've had female scientists in the organization come and say how much they appreciate having a woman at the helm. Working for female leaders certainly impacted me, so it's an honor to think that I might be a role model showing that you can succeed in this field. I take that position seriously. I think that's an amazing opportunity.

What do you appreciate most about the work you do?

I feel most appreciative to work amongst a team of scientists and researchers who share the same sense of purpose - to make a difference in the lives of cancer patients. Not a single person involved in cancer research – at Novartis or any of the institutions I've worked at previously – thinks of this as just a job. For most of us, it's actually a personal mission and we are here with an intention to change the face of cancer because we have seen how it impacts our friends, family and colleagues. And I feel grateful to have a job with that shared purpose.

Meet #cancer researcher Shiva Malek, Global Head of Oncology at Novartis Institutes for BioMedical Research - NIBR

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