

Interview with

**Dr. Stephen M. Robbins, PhD**

## **2023 CCRA Awardee for Exceptional Leadership in Cancer Research**



**What accomplishments as a cancer research leader are you most proud of?**

Well, that's a great question. I'm very proud of several aspects of my time as a leader. I'll highlight a couple of them. First, I have to say that it was a real privilege and honour to serve the Canadian cancer research community and collaborate with so many different individuals across this country. One highlight of my career that I really never thought I'd have the opportunity to do was in the international arena of cancer research. Through my leadership at the International Agency for Research on Cancer, or IARC, which is based in Lyon, France, I was able to chair Governing Council for three years. This was a turbulent time. There were a lot of geopolitical situations that we had to navigate, including the building of a new cancer research centre in Lyon, and working with the French government to achieve that vision. Canada was able to participate in the opening of the Nouveau Centre in May of this year, and it was a great privilege and honour to be part of that.

The second area that I'd like to highlight would be my involvement and leadership with respect to the early career investigator programs that have been both integral to CIHR, but also to the Canadian Cancer Research Alliance. I feel very honoured to be part of the early career investigator career path and to watch so many researchers, from coast to coast to coast, succeed.

**To you, what are the key characteristics of a good leader?**

I think there are many different attributes of a good leader. I think the ability to listen, the capacity to absorb all the information that you've been able to garner from consultations, and the application of principle-based decision-making to attain the goals that you're trying to achieve are all key. You'll never make everyone happy within the research community, but I think being principle-based helps alleviate some of the concerns individuals may have and helps to facilitate an understanding of the decisions being made at different levels.

**How does a diverse researcher workforce enhance and advance cancer research and how can this be accelerated in Canada?**

So that's another great question, but it's not just building diversity into the workforce, I'm going to consider diversity in the broadest sense here. I think of the diversity of people who are involved in research, their backgrounds, their personal experiences, their expertise—bringing in different perspectives provides a compelling environment to enable success. You know, we all have different influences when we grow up based on where we've lived and how we've lived. I

think that listening to those diverse voices and bringing that diversity to the table really enhances the kinds of conversations that you can have about research questions and research problems. And then when you want to implement, whether implementing a health service project or any aspect of the research that we work on, you want to be able to speak to, involve and benefit diverse populations.

**How can Canadian cancer research leaders contribute internationally to advancing cancer research?**

Well, I think we have many examples where Canadian researchers are already leading the way in internationally. You know, we have a very strong footprint within the pediatric oncology space with several leaders in that arena. And I think leading international team grants always helps garner recognition. But now that data is so accessible, you know, we can really collaborate with anyone in the world, independent of time zone, and we can really start to analyze diverse data sets. It's a new time for cancer research with such great access to data now available.

As I mentioned earlier, Canada's leadership with respect to the World Health Organization and IARC are also opportunities that continue to enhance our international reach.

**What career advice would you give to the next generation of cancer researchers who may aspire to leadership roles?**

I don't think I have the secret formula, but what I can say is that taking opportunities early on in someone's career to start building some of the skill sets needed is important. You know, making a big jump is always hard, but using opportunities as stepping stones will help to develop confidence in your abilities.

With respect to my own situation, I had an opportunity early on at the University of Calgary to become the head of a graduate program in the Faculty of Medicine. It was the largest graduate program—over 300 students—and it really helped me develop interpersonal skills, conflict resolution, and really all kinds of skills needed for leadership. So I guess my response to this question is that it's never too early to start on the building blocks to become a leader within the health research environment.

I think taking on leadership does come with some consequences—to your research program, your relationships and family life. It also comes with many different challenges. In my case, my research productivity was not as strong as some of my other colleagues, but I chose to assume leadership opportunities in order to contribute to building a stronger research community. I would also add that I get a lot of joy from watching others succeed!

On the other side of things, the broad network that I have been able to cultivate, and my deep understanding of the Canadian research environment have enhanced my own research program. As an example, one discovery that we made a few years ago, we've been able to take into the clinical arena and have now entered phase two clinical trials. So indirectly, my leadership roles have really enriched my capacity to add value to the research landscape.