

Humans of CDI

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In this special edition of our interview series, we revisit and expand upon the insightful conversation with **Dr. Cesar Castro, MD, MMSc**, an esteemed alum of the Summer Research Trainee Program (SRTP).

Dr. Cesar Castro, MD, MMSc is an Associate Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School, Director of the Gynecologic Oncology Program at the MGH Cancer Center, and the MGH Center for Diversity and Inclusion Faculty Co-Director for Research. Dr. Castro is a translational oncologist with experience leveraging nanotechnology and molecular imaging for solid tumor detection and serial profiling. He also directs the Cancer Program within the MGH Center for Systems Biology. He serves on the steering committee for the National Cancer Institute Liquid Biopsy Consortium.

To learn more about Dr. Castro's perspectives on bold scientific inquiry, the pivotal role of SRTP in fostering diversity and inclusion, and the crucial contribution of centers like CDI in dismantling barriers in academic medicine and research, as well as to discover his unique story and fondness for the timeless allure of "Grease," keep reading.

As an SRTP alum, what impact did that experience have on you, and your career in science?

My time has an SRTP catalyzed a career that values inquiry whether it be scientific or clinical. Interfacing with accomplished investigators within the Massachusetts General Hospital enabled me to appreciate the dedication and investment needed to cultivate an environment of excellence. From a scientific perspective, I started to appreciate the need for “swinging for the fences”. Specifically, it was about not fearing the difficult and riskier questions to ask. While the path of least resistance would be to ask safe, and de-risked questions, it really is about moving the needle in one’s field and beyond. Asking bold questions, however, still requires a sound scientific basis. Seeing how MGH investigators, during my time at SRTP, placed significant energies into appreciating the state of the science and unmet needs profoundly shaped how I approached scientific inquiry today.

The SRTP program has a long history of promoting diversity and inclusion in academic medicine and research. How do you think this program contributes to that mission?

While not readily apparent during my time as an SRTP student, I can now reflect back and identify a key ingredient driving its success. The SRTP program values and promotes an ecosystem of excellence from their underrepresented in medicine investigators. Importantly, that passion is fueled through inclusion and a shared sense of accomplishment, rather than striving for excellence in silos. That aspiration to uplift us all at no one else's expense is the secret sauce of the program. And so, for each SRTP graduate, there is an expectation that they will return to their academic communities and “infect” their peers and others with a shared sense of purpose to augment science while uplifting others.

Having experienced the support and resources provided by the CDI, how do you believe it contributes to breaking down barriers and fostering a more inclusive environment in academic medicine and research? Why are centers like CDI essential in the field of medicine and research, especially in fostering diversity and inclusion?

First and foremost, the tangible resources and benefits provided by CDI offer leverage to the investigator. Notably, they can increase their ability to negotiate protected time and/or space to enable the effective execution of the research. Having great ideas without the tools or resources to pursue them, does no one any good. CDI support lends academic credibility which in turn enhances one’s network reach. Receiving that initial support starts to erode historical systematic barriers inherent in all academic circles that have stifled underrepresented investigators. And when great science and collaborations emanate from those academic pursuits, additional funding and lines of scientific inquiries are catalyzed. These benefits are both tangible and intangible. And when CDI recipients rise along the academic pipeline, they begin to craft their own ecosystems with their own scientific cultures. In so doing, they can inspire trainees and junior faculty and provide the safe spaces to take scientific risks to advance our understanding of the basic, translational, clinical, and population sciences.

What don't people know about you? What would people be surprised to learn about you?

Despite years of personal resistance, I recently caved in and purchased our family’s first mini-van. I now call it my “mid-life crisis car” because it’s so enjoyable and convenient. Where has it been all my life? This example also underscores that maintaining an open mind not only applies to investigative inquiries but modes of transportation as well!

How has this institution changed since you arrived?

My first interaction with MGH was through SRTP as a medical student from UCSF. It was also our current CDI Director Elena Olson's first year. Since my formal arrival in 2008 as an Oncology trainee, I have seen CDI's footprint expand into various facets of the MGH experience, catalyzed by hospital leadership. We have moved beyond talking and are now "walking the walk". There is still much left to do, but at this pace I hope to be jogging soon.

What is your proudest moment/contribution to the work?

Being selected as Faculty Co-Director for Research at CDI, alongside Professor Julie Price, has been a highlight of my MGH experiences to date. I am honored and thrilled about the opportunity to further propel the investigative trajectories of UiM trainees and faculty through this high visibility platform. My own academic trajectory has been punctuated by dedicated and invested mentors and collaborators. I understand the impact of extending one's network reach. In so doing, my hope will be UiM investigators will further entrench themselves into our research ecosystem. Among the myriad benefits, it should render the HMS promotions process an easier journey to navigate.

What is your favorite movie or book?

Hands down, "Grease." It has by far the highest rewatch value due to its superb soundtrack and choreography. This guilty pleasure originated in my childhood. I've toned it down in recent years - my children no longer allow me to recite the entire dialogue...

What advice would you give to UiM trainees and faculty in research?

Effective investigators are not myopic; they see around corners. Maintain an open mind and instead of always seeking predictable routes and opportunities, be on the look out for that potential unexpected collaboration that will catapult you into other exciting directions. And please do pay it forward!