



Why Cancer Care Is Personal to Urologic Surgeon

[Abe Rosenberg](#) Sep 26, 2024
[Breakthroughs Patient Care](#)

When Diana Londoño's father passed away from untreated metastatic prostate cancer, she became a urologist to help save the lives of other patients like him



*Diana Londoño, M.D., assistant clinical professor
in the Division of Urology and Urologic Oncology*

“I’m not the warm and fuzzy type.”

[Diana Londoño, M.D.](#), a City of Hope surgical urologist, is trying, with typical self-effacement, to describe her personality.

Everyone around her knows better.

“Yeah, she’s direct. She’ll tell you exactly what she thinks,” said Meena Said, M.D., who’s been friends with Londoño since their residency days more than a decade ago. “But her depth of feeling is incredible.”

“In our second year,” recalled Dr. Said, “we’re pulling 80-hour weeks, we’re exhausted all the time, we don’t get very attached to patients. And I’m watching Diana in the ICU, sitting with an elderly

man as he's taking his last breaths. He passes, and Diana starts to cry. Just ... crying. I've never seen any other resident do that.”

Patients like what they see, too.

“She's sweet and caring,” says Michael Klein, a [bladder cancer](#) survivor diagnosed and treated by Londoño when she worked in Miami. “She calls me all the time, just to see how I'm doing. What other doctor does that these days?”

Dr. Londoño's colleagues are also impressed by her strong work ethic and kindness.

“She really cares about her patients and colleagues. That's what makes her a great doctor, faculty member and human being,” said [Yuman Fong, M.D.](#), chair of the Department of Surgery and the Sangiacomo Family Chair in Surgical Oncology at City of Hope.

Dr. Londoño smiles when the praise is read back to her.

“I'm just doing my job,” she says.

It's much more than that.

A Personal Connection to Cancer

Born in Mexico City, Dr. Londoño was 12 when her parents divorced and she moved with her mother to Southern California. Despite her limited English, Dr. Londoño excelled at school. In college, she was drawn to a number of leadership activities and seriously considered politics as a possible career. Medicine was not on her list.

Then, on a trip back to Mexico to visit her father, everything changed.

“My father was a very good looking, proud and vain man,” she recalls. “Appearances meant a great deal to him; he had photographs all over the house. And he was a real product of the Latino 'manliness' culture. He'd never admit he wasn't feeling well or anything was wrong.”

But something was very wrong. When he met her at the airport, he was in a wheelchair.

“He was thin, pale and paralyzed from the waist down. He was in diapers. He needed round the clock care.”

Dr. Londoño's father was dying of untreated [metastatic prostate cancer](#). He'd been too proud and embarrassed to seek a doctor's care. In two months, he'd be gone.

It was that shocking, life-altering event that motivated Dr. Londoño to enter UCLA medical school, to help others like her dad and, above all, “to make sure to keep in mind a patient's dignity during illness. Sometimes as doctors, nurses, we become so automated, so busy, that we forget.”

Dr. Londoño does not forget. Ever mindful of the sensitive nature of urological ailments, she takes specific, active steps to maintain her patients' dignity at all times, in matters big and small. The memory of her father is never far away.

“I'll never throw a bunch of incomprehensible techno-babble at a patient,” she says. “It's rude. I make sure they understand everything, regardless of their education level.

“I'll never speak to a patient in my office while he's undressed. I won't begin the examination in a cold, abrupt manner. I'll examine other things first, eventually proceeding to the genital area. And in

the hospital, where patients sometimes tend to be marginalized, if I notice a bit of dirt or a bloodstain that's been left behind in a delicate area, I won't leave it there, I'll clean it right up.

"I'm always thinking, 'Is this the way my dad or my brother would want to be treated?'"

Making Patients Feel Comfortable

Language barriers can also marginalize patients, threaten their dignity and compromise their care, a reality Dr. Londoño observed in medical school when she'd volunteer as a translator. Today, her fluent Spanish comes in handy, both on the job and in the many appearances she makes on Spanish language television to talk frankly about men's urological issues.

Other paths to marginalization? Poverty and cultural differences.

"People with financial means can have access to any excellent doctor," she says, "but there are other patients who may not have this luxury. It is important to be a good doctor to them, too."

If a patient's cultural background moves him to seek "alternative" treatments rather than conventional medicine, here too, Dr. Londoño shows respect.

"I won't dismiss it. I'll give them the best possible care, but I'll also let them go ahead and try other things, so long as they're not dangerous."

Surprisingly, one thing she doesn't much worry about is the gender difference. More than 90% of all urologists are men, for obvious reasons. But Dr. Londoño believes being female works to her advantage.

"A lot of men deliberately go looking for a woman doctor," she points out, "because it's difficult for them to talk about intimate situations with another man. They're afraid of appearing weak. They want someone they can open up to, someone sympathetic who will really listen to them."

Nevertheless, a few patients are uneasy at first, but Dr. Londoño adeptly calms them by speaking gently, paying attention and tossing in a dash of humor. It helps that, growing up, neither she nor her mom ever felt the slightest taboo when discussing sexual matters. Just another part of the body, she says.

And now?

"Hey, I love old men!" she laughs.

And they love what a smart doctor she is.

"My internist thought I had kidney stones," says bladder cancer patient Klein, who suffered for two years before meeting Dr. Londoño at Mercy Hospital in Miami. In short order, she detected the tumors and performed the surgery to remove them.

"She explained everything," Klein says, "including the effects on sexual function. And she was right."

Nearly a decade later, Klein remains healthy and cancer free.

"She saved my life," he says, adding that he now flies cross-country regularly to see Dr. Londoño at City of Hope for follow-up visits. "Why would I not follow her?" he asks. "I don't trust anyone else."

The trust has evolved into deep friendship. In a corner of the Londoño home there's a beautiful rocking chair, a gift from the Klein family when Dr. Londoño's daughter was born.

Choosing City of Hope

Friendship — and a hurricane — played a role in bringing Dr. Londoño to City of Hope.

“Quite frankly, I encouraged Diana to come back to Los Angeles,” says Dr. Said, a fellow surgeon who practices in Santa Monica, California. “We’re very close, and I missed her.”

Dr. Londoño's reluctance to move evaporated when a hurricane struck Miami and flooded her home. Dr. Said was already working the phones, reaching out to City of Hope colleagues. “She helped me get the job,” recalls Dr. Londoño, “Even without my asking her.”

Not that Dr. Londoño needed any help.

“I don't think Diana is fully aware of just how smart she really is,” said Dr. Said admiringly. “She doesn't project it. She's very quiet.

“But she has great surgical skills. She's fiercely honest. And when it comes to compassion, she stands above all others. What you see is what you get!”