

[Return to Main Menu](#)

Noted bone marrow transplant clinician dies

*by Cindy Abole
Public Relations*

Debra Frei-Lahr, M.D., 55, associate professor in MUSC's Division of Hematology/Oncology and founder of the hospital's Bone Marrow Transplant Program, died Aug. 6 at the University of Mississippi Medical Center, Jackson, Miss., after a long illness.



Frei-Lahr devoted her life and career toward helping critically-ill patients. She was highly regarded for her excellent patient care, love for teaching and outstanding clinical skills in managing complications of bone marrow/stem cell transplantation. In 1996, Frei-Lahr performed the first outpatient-matched unrelated-donor transplant at MUSC which was the first of its kind recognized by the National Marrow Donor Program, the tissue procurement organization for blood and marrow transplantation.

Frei-Lahr was born in Cottonwood, Idaho, on Nov. 20, 1953. She was a 1971 graduate of Prairie High School in Idaho and was class valedictorian. She attended Carroll College and was voted most outstanding scholar. Frei-Lahr attended the Pritzker School of Medicine, University of Chicago, and graduated in 1979. She went on to complete her internal medicine residency and hematology/oncology fellowship at the University of Alabama-Birmingham. She also conducted a bone marrow transplant fellowship from 1985-1989 at Barnes-Jewish Hospital, Washington University in St. Louis, Mo.

She and husband, Christopher J. Lahr, M.D., completed their medical studies together and moved to Charleston in 1989 where she began her career at MUSC as a hematologist/oncologist for about 18 years and served as the director of MUSC's Bone Marrow Transplant Service. Frei-Lahr was named director of the Adult Blood and Marrow Transplant Unit in 1989 and later, director of the Pediatric Blood and Marrow Transplant Unit in 2001. Under Frei-Lahr's leadership, the Adult and Pediatric Blood and Marrow Transplant Program earned full accreditation by the Foundation for Accreditation of Cellular Therapy. She also chaired MUSC's Tissue and Organ Transplantation Committee and developed a referral network for hematological malignancy patients throughout the Carolinas. Frei-Lahr held several departmental positions until her retirement in 2007.

"Debbie Frei-Lahr was one of the finest physicians I have ever met," said Robert K. Stuart, M.D., Hematology/Oncology, medical director, HCC Clinical Trials. "As a professional she combined a superior intellect with relentless determination and profound compassion. I grew to respect her wisdom so much that if she disagreed with me about anything, I immediately re-evaluated my own position."

When my wife needed a bone marrow/stem cell transplant, I was extremely pleased that she chose Debbie as her physician. I couldn't think of any hematologist in the world that I trusted more than Debbie with the life of a loved one. Her forced retirement was an enormous loss to the MUSC Blood and Marrow Transplant (BMT) team and to her patients. Physicians and patients all over the state and region are mourning her passing. ”

Colleagues have often described Frei-Lahr as a hard-working, strong clinician; stellar, strong team player, excellent clinician-educator, and a tireless clinician. One colleague noted, “Dr. Frei-Lahr provides state-of-the-art compassion.”

“Dr. Frei-Lahr was a caring and compassionate physician who was admired by her colleagues and cherished by her patients. She will be greatly missed by many whose lives she touched here,” said Ray Greenberg, M.D., Ph.D., MUSC president

Frei-Lahr is survived by her husband, of Jackson, Miss.; daughter, Kelly Frei-Lahr Waldrop and husband, Matthew, of Raleigh, N.C., and son, Derek Frei-Lahr of Blacksburg, Va.; plus other family members elsewhere. A memorial service and reception was held Aug. 12 at MUSC's Hollings Cancer Center. Donations may be made to the ICAN Foundation.

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