

Carolyn Sartor, Professor of Radiation Oncology



Carolyn Sartor, M.D. lives a life that intersects many roles. As a physician, she embodied the “triple threat” of academic medicine; she was simultaneously a clinical researcher, a basic science researcher, and a practicing physician. Having graduated from the University of Michigan Medical School in 1992, she went on to complete her residency training in Radiation Oncology at the University of Michigan while pursuing basic science research at both the University of Michigan and at the Friedrich Meischer Institut in Basel, Switzerland.

In 1998, she joined the faculty in Radiation Oncology and the Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine. In her 10-plus years practicing radiation oncology at the UNC, she led a number of clinical trials, both local and national, including avant-garde trials of intraoperative radiotherapy for early breast cancer and radiosensitization using novel biological therapies for advanced breast cancers. Her NIH-funded laboratory investigations studied the role of newer biological agents as novel radiosensitizers. She became nationally and internationally known as one of the pre-eminent breast cancer physicians. Whether as a director of UNC’s Breast Cancer Program, a leader in the Cancer and Leukemia Group B national clinical trials group, a member of the American Society of Therapeutic Radiation Oncologists, or as Professor and Chair of Radiation Oncology, she was always in the forefront of breast cancer treatment.

As a breast cancer expert, Dr. Sartor’s intersecting roles became ever more complicated and rich when she was diagnosed with breast cancer as a result of radiation treatment of Hodgkins lymphoma during medical school. Initially a “blip” on the horizon as an early stage breast cancer, her role shifted with each subsequent recurrence from that of physician and researcher to that of patient. Ultimately, she reached the stage of needing to let go of her academic career to focus full-time on her own health and spend quality time with her family. In pursuing her dream of traveling via sailboat with her husband, Nick, and son, Keegan, around the Caribbean basin, she reflected and grew in new understanding of the many nuances of self-healing and cancer treatment recovery.

Paralleling her shifting identity from breast cancer physician scientist to patient to survivor, she is now pursuing her interests in breast cancer survivorship and lifestyle changes. As it becomes ever more apparent that many cancers are being controlled to the extent that they become chronic diseases, she hopes to continue to play a complex role in the fight against cancer by learning and helping others to learn to live gracefully with cancer.