

BUSINESS PROFILE

Cancer researcher unites passion for art with science

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
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As president of Tigris Pharmaceuticals, Inc., a biotechnology firm in Bonita Springs, Dr. Edmundo Muniz is helping develop therapeutic drugs for cancer and trying to find a cure.

"We have to be prepared," he said, because the rate of cancer is expected to increase by 50 percent in the next 10 or 12 years. "It is going to be a war between cancer and our ability to defeat it. And I am not planning to lose."

While scientific rigor will be a part of the battle, Dr. Muniz said successful research owes an even greater debt to the arts, because it fuels the imagination.

"We need to bring a little bit of passion and feeling to the world of research," he said, with the emotionally open and sunny disposition acquired as a youth, near the sparkle of the Caribbean Sea, in the Dominican Republic.

"The Caribbean is equal to passion," he said. "Everything is extreme in the Caribbean. If it's hot, it is very hot. If it rains, it rains a lot. The water is very blue. The people are happy and love life."

Dr. Muniz came to America 22 years ago and keeps his most cherished artists close by — paintings by his father, wife and daughter hang in his office; his other favorites are Salvador Dali and Pablo Picasso. He also recognizes the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, not as an enjoyable pastime, but as a crucial part of his profession.

"A few weeks ago I filed my first patent,"

said Dr. Muniz, 52. "A drug for cervical cancer and HPV (a sexually transmitted virus that can cause cancer.) And I can tell you that 90 percent of the reason why I was able to come up with this invention was due to imagination and not knowledge. In a way, poetry is the spark of my imagination and art, in general, is the greatest complement to my science. Without the ability to energize your left brain, science is a dry and limited endeavor."

Before coming to Tigris in 2005, Dr. Muniz earned a master's from the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo. Later he earned a Ph.D. in epidemiology and international health from the University of Michigan. Dr. Muniz has also served as the state epidemiologist for the Indiana State Department of Health.

Most recently, he was vice president of Lilly Oncology Research, where he helped develop the drug Gemzar, a leading treatment for pancreatic cancer. While there, he also compiled hundreds of pieces of art by cancer patients, their doctors and families, which were exhibited at the Royal College of Art in London in 2004, and continue to be shown at galleries in Europe and the United States.

The idea for the art compilation was sparked late one evening while he was "having a few drinks" in Vienna, Dr. Muniz recalled. He and some other doctors were discussing how they could better understand cancer patients' ordeals.

"A couple of glasses of wine always help a little bit to think about this," Dr. Muniz said. "We thought this was going to be a



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Dr. Edmundo Muniz

little thing — five months later, we had 500 pieces of art from around the world, some of them extraordinary works of art."

The art affected him.

"I knew as a physician what breast cancer was, and I knew how deadly," he said. "But I never experienced listening to women with breast cancer — how difficult the journey, what an extraordinary battle it is from a physical, emotional and mental viewpoint. That was a very sobering experience for me."

He left Lilly to work for Tigris so he can focus his research on breast and pancreatic cancers, which he said lack effective therapies. His goal is to develop drugs that

target those cancers directly, instead of the guessing game that he said many doctors play now.

"It's developing the right drug, for the right tumor, for the right patient," he said.

On an average day, he arrives at his office early to catch up on world news from any number of newspapers and magazines.

"I need to be very connected to what's happening in the world," he said. "We're too small to be isolated."

After that he might work with scientists, regarding the development of various chemical compounds to be used for possible drug therapies, and how patients are benefitting from trial drugs.

Later in the afternoon, he may work on his own research projects — such as the drug he patented for cervical cancer — and sometimes speculate about "how to defeat, how to trick cancer."

Sometime during the middle of the day, he takes a walk outside the office in Bonita Springs.

"I go out here and walk around the area, trying to think and enjoy the beauty of the Florida sun and the vegetation," he said.

Dr. Muniz lives nearby the offices, with his wife, two sons and a daughter.

"My family is the biggest engine of my drive, of my passion and even my imagination," he said. "I am immensely proud of having a great woman by my side and three extraordinary children. Walking on the beach with her, having a glass of wine with my boys and listening to my daughter, who is already an opera singer at 16, is the greatest pleasure I can ever experience." ■






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