

## Women in Oncology

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June 15, 2022 4 min read

## New AACR president aims to 'impact the next generation' through mentoring, opportunities

**Lisa M. Coussens, PhD, FAACR**, the 2022 to 2023 American Association for Cancer Research president, aims to make mentorship and education — for both junior faculty and undergraduate and high school students — a core focus of her term.

Healio spoke with Coussens, who also serves as chair of the cell, development and cancer biology department at Oregon Health & Science University and associate director for basic research at Knight Cancer Institute, about how she came to work in cancer biology, tips for how male physicians can be strong mentors and allies for women, and her guiding advice about networking for those in the early years of their oncologic and biomedical careers.

“One of the keys to success is to know your peer group and know your network so that you can go to them for feedback, advice, encouragement and collaboration.”

**Lisa M. Coussens, PhD, FAACR**



**Healio:** What led you to pursue your current career field?

**Coussens:** I completed an undergraduate degree in marine biology in the 70s. Although there were not a lot of jobs at the time, I was lucky enough to get a job washing dishes at Genentech, which had been founded a few years prior. Shortly after, I was able to secure a position in the lab of **Axel Ullrich, PhD**, at Genentech, at the birth of the molecular biology revolution. Axel's lab in the 8 years I worked there taught me molecular biology skills we used for cloning receptor tyrosine kinases (RTKs), epidermal growth factor receptors and others. Axel's subsequent research with colleagues was pivotal for developing trastuzumab for HER2-positive breast cancer.

In the early years of cloning those RTKs, it became apparent that they represented cellular proto-oncogenes conscripted by viral-oncogenes to drive malignancy. The whole notion that normal cellular control mechanisms that drive fundamental proliferation could be usurped in driving a neoplastic process captivated me. It was the first time that I recognized that, in science, we didn't know all the answers and that there was so much to discover. It just sparked creativity and imagination in me. I recognized that I couldn't do very much at the time with a bachelor's degree in ma

biology, so I pursued a PhD in biological chemistry at UCLA. I had phenomenal mentors as a graduate student and subsequently as a postdoctoral fellow, and I have not diverted from an oncology path, always asking fundamental questions about things to which we don't know the answers.

**Healio: What would you say are your goals for your presidency term?**

**Coussens:** There are two major areas I will be focusing my initiatives on, both stemming from personal experience. First, my career has been significantly advantaged by having the kind of mentorship that I had along the way, which included both strong female and male mentors who were good advocates and sponsors for me, as well as people I could trust to tell me the truth. The guidance that I received from them helped me make course corrections while also encouraging me to pursue what I found interesting, even if the field at the time had resistance to going in the direction I did. I was always encouraged to follow my gut and my instincts and let the data drive the process.

Out of that came the modus operandi for my laboratory. What I recognized as a woman in science who had the privilege of obtaining a high profile is that I had the opportunity to impact the careers of young scientists and others around me. Taking the role of a chair to build a program that could impact and support junior faculty seemed too good to be true.

As president, my number one goal is to impact the next generation of scientists through mentoring programs and training opportunities, but also to exercise the platform that the society has to impact undergraduate education and improve opportunities for undergraduates in underserved communities.

That requires more than just stipend support. It also requires travel and housing support for underserved communities to be able to travel out of their environment and stay in a region near a cancer center where they can have a 10- to 12-week experience that has the possibility of changing their career direction.

We also will be looking into the AACR's already successful high school program with the goal of expanding or leveraging the talents of the society to further enhance science education in public high schools whose budgets have been gutted, especially in underserved areas that have been particularly hard hit over the last 2 years but certainly over the last 20 years with budget reductions.

My other major focus as a president is to interact with the NCI and thought leaders involved in the rapidly expanding field of multiplex tissue imaging, and to examine how we can collectively improve common practices and database sharing and long-term storage of data for further exploration.

**Healio: Do you have any advice for what male physicians or scientists can do to be allies for women in oncology?**

**Coussens:** My advice for women in basic science or in clinical disciplines is to seek out strong mentors who are both advocates and sponsors. Sometimes these can be the same individuals, but often these qualities are identified in different individuals. It's not always possible, but I benefited from very strong men and women mentors throughout my career.

The data tell us that men often mentor women differently than they mentor other men. This creates an almost fundamental disparity; it's a disparity that can disadvantage women in this career and likely across all careers, which is why I encourage women to always make sure they have strong female mentorship as well. With male mentors for women, there has to be transparency to ensure that the advice, sponsorship and support that they're giving lacks unintentional gender bias that the data tell us is alive and well in biomedical research and clinical medicine.

Men can be fabulous mentors, and there are some that bar none are the best. What those men have been able to do is neutralize gender so that their advice, encouragement and support is blind to gender. They'll give their best advice to their male mentees and female mentees. Great male and female mentors are able to achieve this with their mentees.

**Healio: Do you have any other advice for women early in their careers?**

**Coussens:** Medical or professional societies provide a phenomenal opportunity for advice and networking for men and women at the beginning of their careers. One of the keys to success is to know your peer group and know your network that you can go to them for feedback, advice, encouragement and collaboration. Know who your family is. The societies can help provide that. The networking, career guidance and career development that come out of the different societies are unsurpassed. I'm a strong advocate for junior faculties to join the societies but not just as a passive observer or member — get involved, join the committees and know who your communities and networks are so you can leverage them.

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**For more information:**

Lisa M. Coussens, PhD, FAACR, can be reached at: [coussenl@ohsu.edu](mailto:coussenl@ohsu.edu).

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