



TITLE

**VP of Early Oncology
R&D, AbbVie**

Theo Ross: From med school to pharma, empathy is the through line of Ross' career

Growing up, Theo Ross says she had “no interest in science.” Instead, she wanted to be a concert violinist or maybe a stand-up comic. She dropped out of high school, went to music school and chased her dreams.

Then she heard her brother, a renowned cellist, play in a recital. She came to a painfully clear realization: ““Oh my God, I can never be this person, and this is who I want to be,”” she thought to herself. “So I quit.”

Decades later, scores of patients can be grateful that Ross put down the violin for the lab coat. Ross, an academic and oncologist at heart, has forayed into industry for the latest chapter of her career. She’s now the vice president of early oncology research & development at AbbVie after prior executive stints at Amgen and Merck.

After switching from music to medicine, Ross landed at Brigham and Women’s Hospital, where she worked under the tutelage of Marshall Wolf, the internal medicine residency director. Wolf is colloquially known as the “dean of medical residency program directors” and helped train more than 2,000 doctors, including more than 1,000 who became full-time professors at leading medical institutions.

Ross said that Wolf only allowed two people in the residency program from Harvard. The rest had to come from medical schools around the country.

“He was a guy who believed in diversity before people believed in diversity,” she said.

Wolf was at Ross’ wedding. And he stepped up for her in the clinic when she had to deal with a family emergency. His empathy became a blueprint for Ross who, despite her ascension, continues to see patients periodically, mainly for family or friends. She’s driven by the fact that just taking a moment out of her day to give some medical advice could extend someone’s life.

The empathy — and the power of diversity — came to the forefront while Ross worked at the University of Michigan. When her soon-to-be-hired lab manager told her she was pregnant, Ross didn’t bat an eye. Only upon reflection did she realize how novel that may have been to someone like that lab manager who was concerned about taking maternity leave in a field where men dominate leadership roles.

Ross next moved from Michigan to UT-Southwestern, where she led the Cancer Genetics Program and had a lab of her own. She investigated how certain genes impacted patients' risk for cancer, including the relationship between BRCA1 and leukemia. In one of the early iterations of Ross' lab, she went by "Snoop Dog," because she was so hyper-vigilant of what everyone was working on that she'd check her researchers' lab notebooks at night. When they'd come back to work the next day, Ross would be armed with questions.

"I learned that I was a micromanager, and I needed to work on that, and I have been working on it ever since," she conceded.

Years later, a conversation with Roger Perlmutter, the former head of Merck Research Labs, inspired her jump to pharma. He offered her a job working in translational medicine — a sweet spot for physician-scientists — and Ross felt it was an opportunity she "had to take." She spent almost two years at Merck before jumping to Amgen for a year.

In November 2022, Ross joined AbbVie as the VP of oncology early R&D, veering the company toward solid tumors with the acquisition of ImmunoGen. She's also been able to hire new leaders on her team and "clean up" some of the early portfolio. Ross said she's not concerned about moving quickly.

"We want to get our drugs to patients sooner," she said. "And if we waste time on something that's not working out, or it's toxic or it's not efficacious, that's bad for patients." — *Max Bayer*

Editor's Note: An AbbVie spokesperson clarified that AbbVie had been working on solid tumors before the ImmunoGen acquisition.