



# American Healthcare Professionals and Friends for Medicine in Israel

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**D**ermatology is magical, according to Dr. Shamir Geller. “The skin is the largest organ of the body and it’s all very visual and accessible!

“It’s amazing how you can get to the diagnosis without any further ancillary testing, by that I mean lab work and radiology,” says the 2016-2017 APF Clinical Research Fellow in cutaneous oncology at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York.

“Dermatology is like the written word, everyone can see it but you need to know how to read it.

“It’s demanding hands-on work. You have to touch the skin to feel its texture, press the area, rub it, and see how it responds. You need to look at the patient as a whole for clues. They may be in the nails, in the hair or in a spot that the patient doesn’t even think is related.

“Dermatology is also something that’s very important for every physician because other diseases can have manifestations on the skin.

The 38-year-old didn’t even contemplate becoming a doctor until sometime during his IDF service. He also met his wife in the military.

The Geller family of five includes: Dad; Mom Yael, 38, a family practice physician; sons Noam, 9 and Yonatan, 6 and daughter Mia, 2 ½. They live in Sloan Kettering-provided housing on New York’s Upper East Side where the older children attend public school. The family will stay two years for Geller’s work. On weekends and holidays they enjoy traveling around New York City (Coney Island is their favorite local destination) and farther afield. So far they have journeyed to Cape Cod, Atlanta (where they got to watch the solar eclipse from Stone Mountain), The Great Smokey Mountains,

The Catskills and Niagara Falls (which Geller dubbed “amazing!”)

“Teaching, supervising and commanding others in the IDF made me realize that interaction with people brings me the most satisfaction. So it was natural for me to seek something in this field. Also, I think that medicine was the thing that held the real intellectual challenge for me.

“Still, even now after completing my long training, at the end of the day I get the most satisfaction relating to patients. I enjoy explaining diseases and dealing with changes associated with diagnoses such as calming patients down and letting them feel their situations are well-controlled and that they are being well-treated. Then, when you get encouraging responses from patients, *that* is most gratifying.

“This is why I chose a fellowship with both clinical and research components. When I’m in the lab I do miss patient contact.

In fact, Geller believes that the quality of the physician/patient relationship can directly influence the disease process. “Healing does, indeed, begin with your relationship with your doctor.

“I have a lot of patients with whom I have good relationships and they change their approaches to their diseases. And diseases get better simply because of good interaction with a physician. On the flip side, however, a bad relationship with a physician can exacerbate a condition.

“There is a well-known association between mental health and physical health and we see that a lot in dermatology. Any disease on the outside affects the inside. Dermatology is so ‘out there,’ you can’t hide it. There is a stigmatization with dermatological issues. You stand in line buying groceries and the person in front of you has something life-

threatening and no one knows it. You have something benign, but it is very visual and every time you shake someone's hand it's there. The skin is the thing that stands between you and the outside.

"It's unique for dermatology and I find dealing with this aspect of the disease, providing support for patients, both challenging and exciting."

In fact, at Geller's home hospital, Tel Aviv Sourasky Medical Center, all dermatology patients may receive mental health services along with skin care.

Geller credits much of his outlook and success to his Israeli mentor Dr. Eli Sprecher, head of Sourasky's dermatology department. "Prof. Sprecher is a superb role model for how communication with patients and their relatives should be conducted on a daily basis. I learned from him that listening and being attentive to our patients is the basis of patient-doctor relations. Without it, it's harder to get to the correct diagnosis. And effective treatment can be impossible."

The Ramat HaSharon (near Tel Aviv) native completed medical school at Sackler Faculty of Medicine, Tel Aviv University. He chose his specialty during his internship at Meir Hospital in Kfar Saba (also near Tel Aviv).

"I just fell in love with dermatology! I found it exhilarating because it's a field that demands delicate observation - you have to listen very well to patients and integrate the complaints with what you see, feel and even smell. You don't have MRI's, echo's and the like to take you to a diagnosis and to catch what you might have missed."

At Meir he took extra dermatology coursework and decided on a residency at Sourasky, home to Israel's largest dermatology service.

There's a saying about Tel Aviv, that "It's the city that never sleeps," according to Geller. It's the same with Sourasky. "It's a very big hospital, right near the city center, and we get lots of people and lots of different kinds of people. Many are those who don't come in during the day - immigrants who can't take

time off from work, homeless people, IV drug abusers, tourists and more.

"We get the more extraordinary and the less common. Because of this, when I took my dermatology boards I had a concrete example of each condition in my head.

"In the United States these people would be admitted to internal medicine; we have 30 beds devoted to dermatology.

"Also, the combination of research and bedside work is great. I think it's important for a physician to understand both to better understand your options. At Sourasky you also get a lot of exposure to basic research in dermatology, learning the mechanisms that cause the diseases. You get a chance to read about some of the most updated science and then see the clinical.

"On the other hand, a researcher also has to have direct contact with patients to better understand the implications of the studies being done.

"That's why I was looking for a fellowship that would have both clinical and research components. Sloan Kettering offered just that. I have always been interested in skin cancer and epidemiology."

At Sloan Kettering Geller is working in a unique clinic that specializes in cutaneous lymphoma.

"Cutaneous or skin lymphoma usually looks like a rash and is often mistaken for eczema or psoriasis. It is 'a sack of a couple of dozen different diseases' that are not life-threatening, that are treatable, but not curable. They are cancers of lymphocytes (white blood cells) that primarily involve the skin and represent an imbalance in the immune system of the skin." Geller has also studied dermatological autoimmune conditions for many years.

"These diseases need close monitoring and on rare occasions can develop into more life-threatening conditions. They can become metastatic and progress to the lymph nodes and blood stream, affecting other organs rather than remaining confined to the skin."

Most cases Geller and his superiors encounter are not surgical. Other clinicians perform any required surgery. Geller's team works with specialists such as: oncologists, radiologists and pathologists.

Depending on the exact diagnosis and stage a disease is in, treatment usually includes: topical agents, light therapy, localized radiation, conventional chemotherapy and novel targeted weapons called "biological therapies." Stem cell transplants are used for advanced cases.

*(Biological therapies to treat disease involve the use of substances derived from living organisms, or laboratory-produced versions of such substances. Biological therapies that interfere with specific molecules involved in tumor growth and progression are referred as targeted therapies)*

Geller spends two days a week in the clinic, from about 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., seeing from 15 to 20 patients a day. "It's very rigorous. We are a referral center for all over the U.S. and the world. Not many places do this specialized work or see this volume and variety. It's intense.

A diagnosis can be very difficult to make either because symptoms don't clearly point in one direction, or the case has already been heavily treated and this "muddies the waters."

On average, someone comes in with a condition that has been misdiagnosed for about eight years, Geller says.

"It's like coming in in the middle of the movie. 'How did it look the first time a clinician saw it?' Sometimes that was a few decades ago.

"Sometimes you're seeing the effects of prior medications, radiation or light treatment. We often have to change the initial diagnosis and move on from there.

"A lot of our new patients are considered chronic. Many have other medical problems and choosing the right treatment means having to integrate many factors, often coordinating with other disciplines, such as radio-oncology. Also, here at Sloan

Kettering we have access to a lot of studies and clinical trials people may participate in as well. So, both the diagnosis and treatment are very difficult decisions.

"You can easily spend a couple of hours or more with one patient."

Geller spends three days a week, from about 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on research. "We look through very large data bases searching for and finding patterns. We're trying to ascertain which features you can see with your eyes and which you can see under the microscope that are helpful in forecasting the outcomes of the disease and responses to treatments. We also look for patterns on scans and in photographs. Sloan Kettering has a very large photograph collection."

So far, Geller and his colleagues have already published five journal articles and have others under review.

Dr. Allen Halpern, head of Sloan Kettering's dermatology service, and Dr. Patricia Myskowski are his U.S. mentors. Geller enjoys working with them and they share some qualities as physicians.

"Dr. Halpern has an integrative thinking process and an inspiring vision of the future. I'm impressed by his holistic way of approaching every single case that is presented, as well as research studies and diagnostic techniques that are discussed.

"And Dr. Myskowski's experience is priceless – there is not a thing in cutaneous lymphoma that she hasn't diagnosed or treated, and her passion for teaching is admirable."

Geller hopes his Sloan Kettering experience will enhance the cutaneous oncology service back at Sourasky where he will be an attending physician in dermatology after he leaves New York. "I will have the most experience in these novel drugs and treatments.

"I will also have the skills to organize data bases the way they are at Sloan Kettering, adding an invaluable component to our research program."

Geller feels privileged in so many ways. “I’m privileged to have been accepted as a fellow at Sloan Kettering. I’m privileged that my wife gave up her very successful career for me to take this fellowship. I’m privileged to live in New York City.

“We did decide this investment is worth it for future career benefits. But it’s still difficult to go from two incomes to one, to transport a family of five overseas and to live in Manhattan. So, we are also privileged to have received financial help from APF.

**American Physicians Fellowship for Medicine in Israel**

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