

**American Society of Hematology**  
**Q&A with Dr. Kenneth Kaushansky, 2008 ASH President**  
**A Career in Hematology**

**Q: What is a hematologist?**

Dr. Kaushansky: A hematologist is a doctor who specializes in blood diseases and disorders. The field of hematology is a unique blend of research and practice. Many hematologists work in academic medical centers, where they split their time between teaching, working with patients, and conducting research in the lab. But it's also possible to go into private practice and focus exclusively on treating patients, or to find a corporate or government position where research is the primary focus.

**Q: What is the difference between hematology and oncology?**

Dr. Kaushansky: These two fields are closely related, with oncology growing out of the field of hematology. Oncology is the study of all cancers, including what are termed "solid tumors," such as lung cancer, breast cancer, or colon cancer. Hematology is the study of blood diseases. This includes non-cancerous disorders, such as anemia and blood clotting problems, but hematologists also treat a number of cancers of the blood and bone marrow, such as leukemia, lymphoma, and myeloma. So there is some overlap between the two. In fact, many doctors go through a combined hematology/oncology training program and are board certified to practice both.

**Q: When did you first become interested in hematology, and what attracted you to choose it as your career path?**

Dr. Kaushansky: As a second-year resident at a major research-intensive university with many terrific opportunities in the subspecialties of internal medicine, I was certain of two things: I was a biochemist at heart, and I enjoyed the beauty of a bone marrow aspirate [marrow is extracted from the bone for testing]. I chose my subspecialty based on the persuasive arguments of Dr. Clement Finch, then Chief of Hematology at the University of Washington. Clem argued in 1980, "there is no other discipline in medicine where we know more about the biochemistry of disease than in hematology," which was as true then as it is now. I was hooked. Following my clinical training in hematology, I entered the laboratory of Dr. John Adamson, who followed Clem as chief of the division. John suggested a project and a pathway: after acquiring the tools of blood cell colony growth, that I should purify a colony-stimulating factor (CSF) [a substance that stimulates the proliferation of blood cells in the bone marrow] by joining the laboratory of Dr. Earl Davie, then Chair of the Department of Biochemistry. In that dual [mentoring setting](#), where protected time for junior faculty was the rule, I gained a great deal, and emerged with a purified blood cell growth factor (GM-CSF), skills in both protein purification [separating one type of protein out from components in the blood] and gene cloning, and "technical courage," the term used by the Nobel laureate Dr. Joe Goldstein to depict the capacity to move one's science however it progresses. I also developed a strong appetite for the discovery of new knowledge and a passion to translate that new knowledge into the tools to help patients with hematologic disease.

**Q: What is a typical week like for you?**

Dr. Kaushansky: After a 16-year career serving primarily as a physician-scientist and teacher at the University of Washington, in early 2002 I chose to take on a greater role in charting the direction of medical science and training in internal medicine, accepting an offer from Dean Edward Holmes to serve as Chair of the Department of Medicine at the University of California, San Diego. As one of the premier research-intensive departments of medicine in the country, made that way by two of its former chairs, the eminent cardiologist Dr. Eugene Braunwald and the equally impressive hematologist Dr. Helen Ranney, I have the privilege of serving in all academic capacities. In a typical week, I will attend three morning teaching conferences for our internal medicine residents, teach one to three hours of didactics in medicine and/or hematology, help recruit new residents, fellows, or faculty, attend my weekly laboratory meeting and confer individually with our laboratory members on several occasions,

help write both research and review manuscripts, organize and write for the *Williams Hematology* book as its Editor, and attend a number of budgetary, strategic, and hospital planning meetings for the department and the school of medicine. I have a theory about working in academic medicine, that it's a genetic disorder – and the result of having the “genetic mutations” that lead one to a career in academic medicine is that you always strive to be on the steep part of the learning curve. After nearly seven years as the chair of a department of nearly 400 faculty and 250 residents and fellows, I remain on that learning curve, and feel very comfortable doing so.

**Q: What do you find to be most rewarding about a career in hematology?**

Dr. Kaushansky: Going back to Clem's advice to me in the fall of 1980, that "there is no other discipline in medicine where we know more about the biochemistry of disease than in hematology," it has been quite rewarding to see that statement as true today as it was 28 years ago, and seeing that impressive volume of knowledge almost routinely being turned into new diagnostic tests, treatments, and predictive tools for our patients with blood and marrow disorders. And the future is even brighter for the learners that I am fortunate enough to lead. OK, those are the three most rewarding aspects of my career!

**Q: Where can I find additional information on a career in hematology?**

Dr. Kaushansky: If you are interested in becoming a hematologist, visit the [Blood: The Vital Connection](#) Web site, to learn more about the educational path of a hematologist and the different settings in which these doctors treat patients and conduct research.