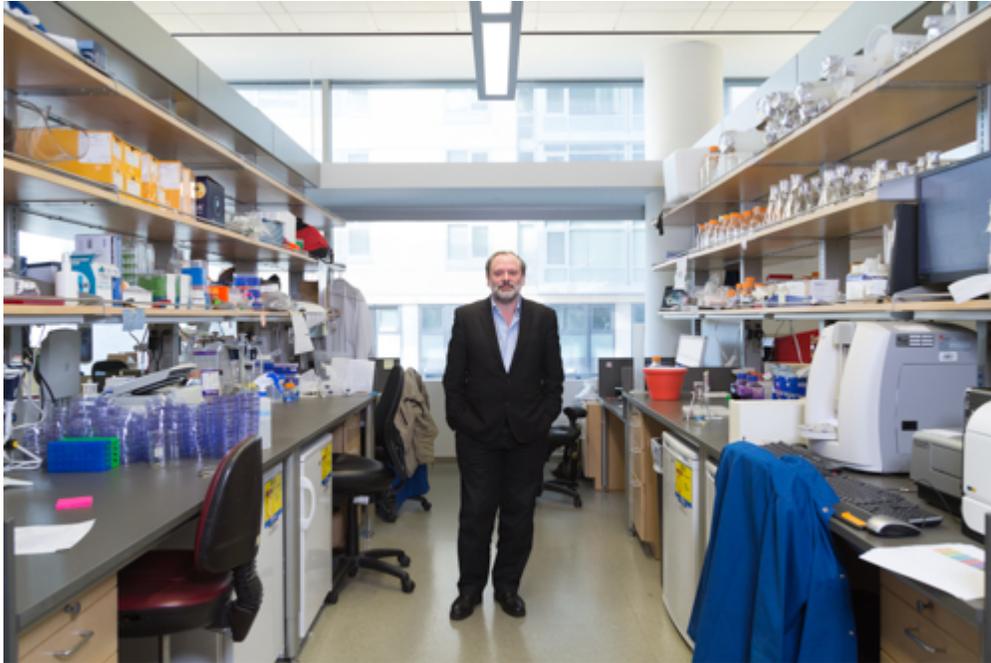


Tuesday, January 31, 2017

Not Afraid of A Sticky Wicket: Meet Alan Ashworth of UCSF Cancer Center



Dogpatch resident Alan Ashworth stands in the UCSF Mission Bay lab he heads in his fight against cancer.

The immense growth of UCSF in Mission Bay has been a cause of great concern for Dogpatch residents as neighborhood leaders and residents grapple with such issues as the encroachment of the campus into the Dogpatch neighborhood, parking problems and the unsightly cigarette butts left on Dogpatch streets by UCSF staff who are not allowed to smoke on the 100% smoke-free campus.

But of course UCSF is neither all bad nor all good and the access to a top medical facility and the best researchers and doctors benefits so many people locally and worldwide. In the interest of building bridges instead of walls, we sat down with Alan Ashworth, president of the UCSF Helen Diller Family Comprehensive Cancer Center who also happens to be a Dogpatch resident.

Ashworth, who joined UCSF in December of 2014, is probably best known as part of the team of scientists who in 1995 discovered the gene BRCA2 which is linked to an increased risk of some types of cancer -- for example, breast cancer -- and is now used to identify women at high risk for the disease. In 2005 he identified a way to exploit genetic weaknesses in cancer cells which led to a new approach in cancer treatments.

Although he is a scientist and not a surgeon, Ashworth demonstrates a real talent for identifying and tackling difficult health care issues and with surgical like precision, zeroing in on how to solve the problem by finding the right people and the needed

funding to help overcome any obstacles to the solution. One example is the recently announced San Francisco Cancer Initiative (SF CAN), a major public health effort to reduce cancer in San Francisco.

We met with Ashworth in his UCSF office one very rainy day. But our complaints about the rain were met with a laugh from Ashworth who in his British accent said that where he grew up in Northern England they had 200 different words for rain and what we were experiencing barely qualified as rain. He seemed very glad to not have to use those 200 words anymore.



Petri dishes in the UCSF cancer lab headed by Alan Ashworth.

Why do you do what you do?

The feeling you get when you meet someone who survived because of a treatment you discovered is pretty great. To know that you impacted someone's life in that way is incredibly moving and motivating. I want to keep doing that kind of work.

So my work experience motivates me but also personal experience motivates me. My dad died of lung cancer several years ago. He told me not to go to the doctor appointment with him where his treatment was going to be discussed. Of course I went with him. And of course my dad was in such shock that he heard practically nothing that the doctor said that day. It is so important to have someone help you through a cancer diagnosis. People are afraid and they also fear the lack of control over their life that comes with a cancer diagnosis. I knew everyone in cancer research and I couldn't do anything to save him. My dad died but I know today we could get him into an immunotherapy drug trial and he would have had a chance of survival.

I grew up in Northern England in a post-industrial textile town. My mom still lives

there. It was a working class town but the schools were good. I was the first person in my extended family to go to university. I attended Imperial College of Science and Technology in London. I thought I would go into medicine but I chose chemistry instead. I received my PhD in Biochemistry at University College, London. I joined the Institute for Cancer Research in London as a researcher and eventually became CEO. Then UCSF called me about being the director of their cancer center.

No one was more surprised than me when I accepted. It took me a long time to decide and I still didn't know what my answer would be when UCSF Chancellor Sam Hawgood called to ask me for my decision.

In the end the decision came down to asking myself "Why Not?" The Bay Area, San Francisco, UCSF -- this is the universe for innovation and excitement in cancer research and patient care. There is a feeling that anything is possible here. And that has turned out to be more true than I even thought it would be. I have never regretted my decision.

I'm proud of the fact that UCSF is a public organization and as such we have to see everyone. Our goal is long-term remission or cure. But the goal is also treatments that give a better quality of life -- more gentle treatments.

One of my projects is the building of the Precision Cancer Medical Building which will be located at Third and 16 Street. It should open to patients in 2019. This 170,000 square foot cancer outpatient clinic will be like no other. This clinic is my baby. The center will deliver the best possible treatment for cancer and this clinic will be very patient centric. Patients will be treated like they matter. We want people to feel in control of their treatment and involved in the decision making. Even the design of the building will be created with the patient in mind with natural light, related treatment rooms in one area instead of spread out all over the facility so patients have to race from one floor to another for appointments. I would rather lose efficiency than patient focus.

One of my other projects is SF CAN -- the San Francisco Cancer Initiative. This program aims to reduce cancer in SF that can be reduced by better screening and early interventions. My second week here I had a germ of the idea for this program. I went to a retreat which ended up being about the issue of race in medicine and health. I found the topic fascinating. There was so much I didn't know. I had no idea that there was such big disparities. I wondered how a program could be put together for an entire community -- the San Francisco community. The idea is completely measurable and we want it to be. It took 18 months but we launched the program in November. SF is where people come together to do big things like the work done to fight HIV. The idea is that UCSF will provide the scientific backbone while city public health and nonprofit agencies supply the staff and physical space to reach at risk populations. And it is a real partnership with the SF community. Our logo isn't even on the marketing materials.

As you can see, my work reflects my passion for the development of personalized cancer treatment.



Why Dogpatch?

We were introduced to real estate agent **Anne Herrera** -- she works with a lot of UCSF people who are trying to find a home to buy. She was so honest and helpful about the process of buying in the San Francisco real estate market where there is little inventory and prices are high.

We looked at many neighborhoods in SF and while many of them, were beautiful we were looking for a more diverse neighborhood. We also wanted to live close to Mission Bay where my office is but not too close!

I had arrived in the U.S. before my wife so I got the chance to wander around Dogpatch a bit. I thought it was quite nice. I liked the diversity I saw and it felt like a real neighborhood with all the shops and restaurants. We weren't sure we could afford to look here but with Anne's help we were able to find a small condo to buy which just happens to be on the same street as where Anne lives. So she definitely knew the neighborhood!

We enjoy walking around the neighborhood and being greeted by neighbors. It is very different from our London neighborhood where you really didn't get to know anyone because people didn't stay too long there. And of course the proximity to Mission Bay was perfect. We have settled in nicely although you can't find much cricket here.

What would you be doing if you weren't doing this?

There is nothing I enjoy more than the work I am doing. It is serious work but that work is helping people in a big way.