“I have the best job in the world,” says John Lurain, MD, Marcia Stenn Professor in Gynecologic Oncology at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. Lurain’s work includes clinical practice, teaching, and research. And he thoroughly enjoys all three.

Dr. Lurain chose the field of gynecologic oncology because it allowed him to be involved with both surgical and medical treatment of cancer patients. “I was really interested in that sort of comprehensive approach to patient care — plus the fact that we can cure a lot of patients with gynecologic malignancies. That made it very attractive to me.”

A Father’s Dream Fulfilled
Dr. Lurain says he has been interested in medicine as far back as he can remember. As a child, “I was always interested in science and medicine,” he says. “And becoming a doctor was my goal.”

But Lurain was also motivated by a wish to fulfill his father’s lost dream. After returning from military service following World War II, Lurain’s father enrolled in medical school only to drop out a year later when he could no longer afford it. “I think my dad always wanted me to become a physician and accomplish what he wasn’t able to,” says Lurain.

Education
After receiving his undergraduate degree from Oberlin College in Ohio, Dr. Lurain enrolled in the University of North Carolina’s School of Medicine...
Dr. Lurain’s desire to teach was also influenced by the fact that both of his parents were educators. After leaving medical school prematurely, Lurain’s father became a high school science teacher. “My dad was just a great teacher,” he said. “You could tell he loved his work.” Lurain’s mother was a kindergarten teacher. Both taught in Lurain’s hometown of Hampshire, Illinois, a small town of less than 1,000 residents. “It was a lot like the town in the film, ‘Hoosiers,’” he says. “Everything revolved around the basketball team on which I played and the school gym. I thought it was a great place when I was growing up there because I got to participate in so many different sports and school activities.”

While Lurain enjoys all dimensions of his work, he says he probably enjoys teaching the most. “Teaching is the noblest profession,” he says. “By educating others you make an impact that lasts for generations.” Dr. Lurain has won multiple teaching awards, including the Magnus P. Urnes Award for both resident and medical student teaching from the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, and the CREOG National Faculty Award for Excellence in Resident Teaching. He developed and currently directs the only gynecologic oncology fellowship in Illinois. “I like to think that if I teach a student just one thing, it will make a difference in a future patient’s care,” he says.

Research
Dr. Lurain’s principal research focuses on clinical factors associated with the prognosis and treatment of gestational trophoblastic diseases, as well as uterine and ovarian malignancies. He has received support for his research from several prestigious organizations, including the American Cancer Society and the NCI, as well as philanthropic funds. He has authored nearly 200 scientific publications.

Dr. Lurain is the Director of the Feinberg School of Medicine’s John I. Brewer Trophoblastic Disease Center, one of only two such centers in the United States. Gestational trophoblastic diseases involve the proliferation of trophoblastic tissue in pregnant women and include choriocarcinomas, which are rare cancers of the placenta. Since Dr. Lurain began his practice, he says he has witnessed significant advances in the treatment of trophoblastic tumors, including the accurate measurement of the tumor marker HCG (Human Chorionic Gonadotropin), which has helped physicians diagnose and manage these diseases with greater precision, and the identification of prognostic factors, which allow doctors to tailor treatments to the individual patient, reducing side effects and improving outcomes. Because of discoveries such as these, as well as the development of effective new chemotherapies, most patients with gestational trophoblastic diseases can now be cured, even when the disease is detected at an advanced stage.

Putting Patients First
Dr. Lurain is always mindful that caring for patients “is the most important thing we do. It’s such a privilege,” he says. “You may be giving a lecture or engaged in your research, but if there’s a patient who needs your attention she must be your first priority.”

A Family of Scientists
Dr. Lurain lives in Oak Park with his wife of over 40 years, Nell, a virologist at Rush University Medical Center. Their oldest daughter, Alice, earned a PhD in organic chemistry and now teaches high school chemistry in Brooklyn, New York, and their younger daughter, Kate, is a second-year medical student at the University of Virginia. She intends to go into the field of infectious disease.