H ard work and accomplishment come naturally to Bharat Mittal, MD, Professor and Chair of the Department of Radiation Oncology at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. In addition to his busy clinical practice at the Lurie Cancer Center where he treats patients for lymphomas, skin, and head and neck cancers, Dr. Mittal has an active research program and is deeply involved in educating and mentoring students. He thrives on the wide range of challenges, asserting the “variety keeps life interesting.”

Mittal grew up in the northern part of India, and became interested in medicine when his cousin, a general practitioner, invited the young high school student to accompany him on his rounds. Even then, he enjoyed the patient interaction and was inspired by his cousin’s ability to help others. “It just gave me a sense that medicine would allow me to do something for others, something worthwhile,” says Mittal. During his internal medicine rotation, he decided to specialize in radiation oncology. “I really enjoyed talking to the patients and their families and witnessing the difference we could make as physicians,” he says. “For this reason, the field of oncology seemed like the right fit for me.”

After earning his medical degree from Christian Medical College in Ludhiana, and completing his internship there, he completed his residency in radiation oncology at Northwestern University followed by a fellowship at the Mallinckrodt Institute of Radiology. He was a faculty member at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis and the University of Pittsburgh. In 1985 Mittal returned to Northwestern, joining the Division of Radiation Oncology in the Department of Radiology, becoming head of the division in 1993.

Mittal continued his leadership as founding chair when the Department of Radiation Oncology became the 25th department at the Feinberg School in 2006. He is justifiably proud of its growth. “We are treating many
more patients, and our research funding has increased tremendously,” he says, nothing that the number of faculty and residents have nearly doubled.

Along with other members of the Radiation Oncology team, Mittal works closely with clinicians and researchers in a wide range of medical specialties, and believes that everyone benefits from these collaborations. “I agree with Isaac Newton—‘We build too many walls and not enough bridges’-- I definitely prefer building bridges,” he says.

He gets great satisfaction from all aspects of his work, but Mittal says he finds his clinical work especially gratifying. “I have lengthy relationships with most patients I treat. Some I’ve seen for as many as 15 years so we become close,” he says. Mittal often receives holiday cards and likes keeping up with his patients and their families. “I just enjoy being able to help them,” he says.

Mittal’s research focuses on using advanced radiation technologies in combination with chemotherapy to increase tumor control while decreasing toxicity. His work is international in scope and involves collaboration with experts at Northwestern and from around the world. Mittal says he may have been the first to study the effect of combined hyperthermia and 131 I-Labeled Anti-CEA monoclonal antibodies to control tumors and reduce the toxicity associated with conventional treatments. While this particular study was negative, radiolabeled antibodies are now routinely used in cancer treatment.

Mittal is currently Co-Principal Researcher for a study involving intensity modulated radiation therapy (IMRT) in the treatment of head and neck cancers. The aim of this NIH-funded study is to reduce the amount of radiation received by normal tissues surrounding the tumor, while simultaneously increasing the tumor’s absorbed dose. His clinical and translational research career covers nearly 30 years and includes over 200 articles, book chapters, and abstracts.

Teaching and mentoring is another aspect of Mittal’s career that he values. In addition to the medical students, residents, and fellows he has guided over the years, Mittal has mentored many high school and undergraduate students who have gone on to study medicine.

He is active in several professional organizations, including the American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO), where he was recently elected to the board of directors, and the Society of Chairmen of Academic Radiation Oncology Programs (SCAROP), where he is president.

Mittal lives in Oak Brook with his wife, Raj, a medical oncologist in private practice. He has two children who have followed in their parents’ footsteps and become quite successful in their own careers. An avid golfer, skier and scuba diver, Dr. Mittal has gone heli-skiing in the mountains of British Columbia and recently explored the Great Barrier Reef.