Advocating for children’s cancer care drives everything Morris Kletzel, MD, MBA, does as a pediatrician and specialist in hematology/oncology. “I’m committed to protecting children from being treated as second-class citizens, and ensuring they receive the best of care,” says Kletzel, Professor of Pediatrics, Division Head Emeritus of Pediatric Hematology, Oncology, and Stem Cell Transplantation at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, and Director Emeritus of the Center for Cancer and Blood Disorders at the Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago (formerly Children’s Memorial Hospital). “We have great health care in the United States but we also need to make sure that kids in Central and South America and other parts of the world have access to cancer treatment.”

A pediatric transplant expert, Kletzel founded Lurie Children’s stem cell transplant program 21 years ago. He also developed a program to train visiting Latin American physicians in pediatric transplantation for treating cancer and other diseases like sickle cell anemia. Under his tutelage, program graduates have gone on to lead successful pediatric transplant services in countries including Colombia, Mexico, Chile, and Venezuela. Currently Kletzel is as an advisor to 10 of these programs, and periodically makes on-site visits. He remarks, “Transplantation techniques and outcomes can vary widely and be very different in other countries.”
Born in Mexico City and the oldest of three children, Kletzel decided early on that he was more interested in becoming a physician than joining his father in the business world. “I always wanted to help people,” he says. After earning his medical degree at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and completing an internship at the University of Tel Aviv in Israel, he began an internal medicine residency in Mexico only to discover that pediatrics was his true calling. He sought training in the United States, where he completed his pediatric residency at the University of Arkansas in Little Rock and then served as chief pediatric resident there. With two years left on his five-year student visa, Kletzel went to The University of Texas M.D. Anderson Hospital and Tumor Institute at Houston for a one-year fellowship in pediatric hematology/oncology. He spent an additional year there as chief fellow.

In 1980 Kletzel returned to his native Mexico and started a pediatric hematology/oncology program at his medical school alma mater and at General Hospital of Mexico, one of the country’s largest public hospitals. For the next four years, he combined private practice with academic medicine. Then his career took a different turn when he ran into some former U.S. colleagues at a medical conference in Mexico City. He recalls, “They knew I was frustrated by not being able to fully do the kind of work I want to do, so they said, ‘You should come back to the States and practice.’” Kletzel did just that. He became a faculty member in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Arkansas in the mid-80s. An opportunity to launch a pediatric stem cell transplantation program at Children’s Memorial brought him to Northwestern in 1991. “For the first eight years, it was just me, myself, and a nurse practitioner,” says Kletzel, who in 2002 was named the hospital’s Meryl Suzanne Weiss Professor in Pediatric Hematology Oncology. Today the stem cell transplant program boasts five physicians, four nurse practitioners, a social worker, and other support staff.

**Groundbreaking Work**

Understanding and improving the treatment of neuroblastoma via stem cell transplant has long been a clinical research interest of Kletzel. Two decades ago most pediatric patients with high-risk neuroblastoma tumors did not survive. Then, in 1994, a novel but somewhat controversial experimental treatment was proposed: it involved combining three high doses of chemotherapy with autologous stem cell transplants in short, three-week increments. A highly toxic regimen, this therapy came with significant risks but they proved to be worth taking—it improved the survival rate by 50 percent. Over time, with modifications to the treatment protocol, the rate has increased to 60 percent. Kletzel directed the innovative clinical studies at Children’s Memorial until the trial concluded in 2002. Although he received some criticism at the time for taking such an extreme approach with this therapy, Kletzel is happy with the result: he has patients who are now living 10 to 15 years free of disease.

“My current research focuses on trying to figure out why the other 50 percent didn’t do well,” he says. “We believe for the patients whose transplants failed and/or they relapsed, we couldn’t get rid of the tumor stem cells.”

In addition to cancer treatment, Kletzel has directed transplant studies aimed at sickle cell anemia. “Transplant is the only curative therapy for the condition as long as we can find donors,” he says. Beyond his research and clinical endeavors, Kletzel is a member of numerous national and international professional societies and serves as International Associate Editor of Anales Medicos.

A racquet ball player and an avid cyclist who rides up to 100 miles a week, Kletzel lives in Fort Sheridan, in one of the community’s renovated Army barracks with his wife, Irene. The couple, who met at a New Year’s Eve party in Mexico City, has two children and four grandchildren.