A sepia-toned photograph from a bygone era sits in prominent display in the office of Alexis Thompson, MD, MPH, Professor of Pediatrics at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. The photo features Thompson’s great-great-aunt, Sophia B. Jones, who graduated from the University of Michigan Medical School in 1885 and became its first black female doctor. “It’s remarkable what Sophia, whose father was born a slave, achieved in just one generation,” shares Thompson.

An interest in genealogy led this Southern California native to the Jones branch of her family tree. She discovered that Jones had a passion for advancing public health and achieving health equity in the post-Civil War era, publishing in 1913 a retrospective article entitled “Fifty Years of Negro Public Health.” “Hopefully we’ve made substantial progress in the last 100 hundred years and will continue to do so.” Fittingly, Thompson has followed in Jones’ footsteps. In her role as the Lurie Cancer Center’s Associate Director for Equity and Minority Health, Thompson helps develop community outreach programs and looks for opportunities to better serve all communities across Chicago and nationwide when it comes to cancer care. “We’re not only interested in the reach of the Lurie Cancer Center’s clinical programs but also ways we can encourage greater participation of underrepresented communities in clinical trials and research,” she explains. “By better understanding the
impact of cancer diagnoses and screening in communities of color, we can begin to reduce health disparities.”

Building Blocks
Growing up in Los Angeles, Thompson knew two things: she loved science and she wanted to make a difference. Medicine fit the bill, and Thompson earned a bachelor’s degree in zoology from Pomona College in Claremont, California, before attending medical school at Tulane University. The dynamics of specializing in pediatrics greatly appealed to her. “Treating the particular diseases that afflict children really allows pediatricians to impact peoples’ lives,” she says. “I enjoy interacting with families and the community.” After a pediatric internship and residency at Children’s Hospital of Los Angeles, Thompson completed a fellowship in pediatric hematology/oncology at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia. She then returned to Southern California, joining the faculty at UCLA where she earned a MPH degree in health services. Recruited to Northwestern University to build a robust pediatric hematology program, she arrived in Chicago in 2001.

Under Thompson’s leadership as Medical and Scientific Director of Hematology at the Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago (formerly Children’s Memorial Hospital), the program has flourished. Although the program was once primarily clinical, it now features a vibrant clinical research component. As many as 700 new patients with non-malignant blood conditions seek care each year through the Center for Cancer and Blood Disorders at Lurie Children’s, and some 500 individuals have been enrolled in clinical trials funded by the National Institutes of Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration, and industry. Says Thompson, “It’s been extremely rewarding to see the program grow and evolve to become one that is incredibly diverse and has attained national stature.”

Clinical and Research Efforts
Seeing patients with sickle cell disease, thalassemia, and other hemoglobinopathies, Thompson’s clinical research focuses on enhancing care and increasing understanding of these disease processes. At Lurie Children’s, she and her colleagues have built one of the most comprehensive pediatric sickle cell programs in the state and the largest thalassemia program in the Midwest. Proud to report that her oldest thalassemia patient turns 61 this year, Thompson has seen vast improvement in her ability to treat this once fatal childhood condition. She credits advances in iron chelation, transfusion practices and new surveillance tools such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). “At Children’s Memorial and Northwestern, we were among the first institutions in the United States to use MRI to quantify liver and heart iron in these patients,” says Thompson, who holds the A. Watson and Sarah Armour Endowed Chair for Blood Diseases and Cancer at Lurie Children’s. “Now we can identify iron overload earlier to increase survival.” She sees great potential in expanding collaborations to include adult hematology providers at Lurie Cancer Center and Northwestern Memorial Hospital.

Bone marrow failure syndromes and stem cell transplantation for nonmalignant disorders in pediatric patients also interest Thompson. In the laboratory, she has conducted studies that focus on developmentally regulated genes in early hematopoieses. At a national level, Thompson provides leadership and promotes research in blood disorders as a member of the Executive Committee of the American Society of Hematology (ASH). She also serves on the ASH Committee for Promoting Diversity which seeks to encourage more minority students, trainees and junior faculty to consider academic careers in hematology.

Thompson resides in Chicago’s South Loop neighborhood with her husband, Garry, a fine arts woodworker. She enjoys cycling, gardening, travel and cooking. She has also been exploring different ways to commute to the hospital since its move to Streeterville from Lincoln Park (so far biking has been the fastest and most fun). She reports that the transition to the new building has exceeded her expectations. “We want to provide the same high level of personal care but now in a state-of-the-art facility,” says Thompson, who is thrilled by the new logistics. She has already taken advantage of attending presentations and participating in other activities on the Chicago campus. “It seems we have been able to translate the same warmth of the old hospital that was developed over many years to this new one incredibly well.”