Her large ears flapping, an angry elephant charges at a pack of hyenas to protect her defenseless calf. A leaping impala literally jumps out of the mouth of a hungry lioness. Recently picked up by international news outlets like Britain’s Daily Mail, these dynamic images of wildlife in Botswana are the work of photo buff Jayesh Mehta, MD, Professor of Medicine at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine.

“After I completed my initial medical school studies, I thought about giving up medicine to become a photographer,” shares Mehta, Director of the Lurie Cancer Center’s Hematopoietic Stem Cell Transplant Program and Co-Deputy Director of the Comprehensive Transplant Center at Northwestern. “I had published some photos and won a competitive international prize but with a little hindsight, I am glad I stuck with medicine!”

Like his physician father, Mehta attended Bombay University, where he earned his MD degree in 1990. There he met his spouse, Seema Singhal, MD (see profile on page 7 for more about Dr. Singhal), who was a year behind him. Also similar to his dad, Mehta specialized in hematology/oncology, but in his own way—in the then emerging area of bone marrow transplantation. He says, “Training was absolutely not available in India. It was clear we had to go abroad.”
Becoming Transplant Experts
After completing a one-year fellowship program at Hadassah University in Jerusalem, Israel, Mehta and Singhal were ready to bring novel cancer treatments to patients. However, their homeland of India lacked the infrastructure to support such sophisticated techniques. Then, a series of opportunities and chance encounters guided the career direction of Mehta and his wife for the next eight years as they honed their skills and became renowned experts in stem cell transplantation and multiple myeloma.

From 1992 to 1996, they were senior registrars at the Royal Marsden Hospital in London; Mehta served as a Bone Marrow Transplant Coordinator, and Singhal, a fellow in the Department of Medical Oncology’s Leukemia and Myeloma Units. While pursuing their clinical and research interests, the couple came across an opportunity to do even more at the University of Arkansas in Little Rock. There Mehta became Chief of Allogeneic Stem Cell Transplantation and was one of the key investigators (Singhal was the other) involved in the exciting discovery of the drug thalidomide as a novel compound for combating cancer.

“We started two patients simultaneously on the drug,” recalls Mehta. “The program chief and I were jointly looking after one of them and Seema, the other. Her patient responded to the drug, which launched a whole new category of drug treatments for myeloma.”

Elevating Northwestern’s Stature
A Grand Rounds lectureship brought Mehta to Chicago and the Lurie Cancer Center for the first time in 1999. Although he didn’t know anyone at Northwestern, that soon changed when Lurie Cancer Center Director, Steve Rosen, MD, introduced himself. “He said, ‘Wonderful lecture. If you ever want a job, I have one here for you.’”

While flattered, Mehta had just relocated to take a position as Director of the Myeloma and Lymphoma Program at the University of South Carolina in Columbia. Several months later, though, financial difficulties shut down the program. Says Mehta, “I called Dr. Rosen and said I don’t know if you remember me and right away he said, ‘I do. Would you like a job?’” This time, Mehta took him up on the offer. “Seema and I believed there was great potential to build something really nice at Northwestern.”

Indeed, that turned out to be the case. Since Mehta joined the Lurie Cancer Center in 2000, the Stem Cell Transplant program has grown from approximately 45 per year to become among the top 5-10 nationally in volume and types of transplants, averaging close to 280 annually. He remarks, “I credit our success to achieving good clinical outcomes for our patients and building bridges to people in the community.”

Beyond his clinical work, Mehta’s research interests include advancing treatment for plasma cell malignancies such as multiple myeloma; hematopoietic stem cell transplantation to fight opportunistic infections in immunocompromised patients; and the use of stem cells in organ transplantation.

“Maintaining transplanted organs without rejection can be a major struggle,” explains Mehta. “If we could use allogeneic stem cells from the organ donor to induce tolerance in the recipient then we could possibly begin to withdraw immunosuppressive drugs and eliminate lifelong dependency on them.”

The occupational hazard of working in the same field as his spouse has been to dissuade the couple’s two sons, Neil, 21, and Aran, 14, from becoming physicians. Says Mehta, “We’ve been quite successful!” In the past several years, Mehta has renewed his passion for photography. In 2012 he entered a wildlife photography competition sponsored by the BBC and the London Natural History Museum. The venerable international contest often attracts over 50,000 submissions. Although Mehta didn’t win a prize, two of his photos—the angry elephant and the leaping impala—reached the finals.