

DR. MAHER ALBITAR

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GENOMIC TESTING COOPERATIVE

GAME CHANGER

Why genomics CEO came back to Houston after leaving TMC

Q&A When Dr. Maher Albitar left Houston for the first time, he wanted to bring the knowledge he'd picked up in the Texas Medical Center elsewhere.

"I was educated and practically taught to think out of the box and to be a leader in oncology at MD Anderson," said Albitar, now the founder and CEO of Genomic Testing Cooperative, in an interview with the Houston Business Journal. "I decided to leave academia and go into industry because I felt that I learned so much and that we applied so many things, and I thought at the private sector I could really disseminate this information to other oncology practices."

Albitar had been the chief of leu-

kemia and a full professor at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center for 12 years after arriving in 1991. Originally from Syria, he completed his medical training at the University of Pennsylvania before moving to the Bayou City.

Now, Albitar is bringing his own genetic testing company, Genomic Testing Cooperative, back to Houston. The company is moving into the Alexandria Center for Advanced Technologies at The Woodlands.

Albitar says Houston's medical research environment looks different than when he left, thanks to an increased focus on innovation.

"It's way easier to get things done in Houston than anywhere else, and practically all the experience you need, you will find there," he said.

The HBJ sat down with Albitar to learn more about his journey.

After leaving MD Anderson, why did you go into genomics testing for your company? Genomics

practically changed how we practice and diagnose cancer as a whole. Currently we are in the era of precision medicine. We know currently that no two patients with the same cancer are the same and the treatment should be tailored to each patient and the only way you can do precision medicine is through precision diagnostics.

We will define what drives the cancer and the therapy that targets the abnormalities of the cancer. As a matter of fact, that's what drove me to found this company. It is more

Dr. Maher Albitar, CEO of Genomic Testing Cooperative, which recently expanded to The Woodlands.

of a collaborative work campaign, so we work with other diagnostic companies and health care systems so they can internalize our testing at their own facilities, or we can do it ourselves.

My role is to advance innovation in genomics and disseminate genomics. I strongly believe that every patient with cancer deserves to have their cancer genomically profiled for treatment.

And why did you bring GTC to the Houston area?

Houston is a center for innovation when it comes to cancer, and it's not only MD Anderson, it's Texas Children's Hospital and the other institutions in Texas. The ecosystem is ideal for innovation, and as a matter of fact we already have some collaborative work with multiple institutions, so being close to that environment can really help us in our vision.

At the same time, I chose to open the lab in The Woodlands because I want to take the diagnostic part outside the academia, outside the Medical Center. As you know, there are multiple oncology practice groups, and I want them to be able to offer quality cancer therapy and cancer care similar to that provided by MD Anderson and other academic medical centers.

What is the biggest current barrier for this field?

Insurance companies. They need to pay for the science, because frankly, this saves a lot of money in the system. If you give the patient the therapy that can target that cancer – as opposed to a generic therapy that you hope is going to work, and if it doesn't, you can't try again – that costs the system way more than if you figure out the molecular basis for cancers.

Unfortunately, insurance companies and the health care system do not really adapt to the new technology fast enough, so educating insurance companies, and to some extent practicing oncologists and pathologists, about new tools that are available will save money. Practically, this is a major impediment for dissemination of this type of technology.

– Jishnu Nair

This interview was edited for length and clarity.