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Enterprising Woman

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Cancer Crusader

An interview with Anu D. Saad, Ph.D., chairman and CEO of IMPATH Inc. *By Carrie Schwab Pomerantz*

IMPATH Inc. is in the business of increasing the ranks of cancer survivors. Founded in 1988 by two researchers from Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, the company helps physicians treat cancer more effectively by providing testing and analysis. IMPATH also provides important patient information and other data to biopharmaceutical/genomics companies to help them develop more targeted drugs to treat various cancers. Anu D. Saad, Ph.D., 44, was named CEO in 1993, after joining the company three years earlier as scientific director. With several years' experience as a cell-biology researcher and professor at Cornell University Medical College–New York Hospital, she has successfully bridged the gap from academia to business.

Recently, Carrie Schwab Pomerantz, vice president of consumer education at Charles Schwab & Co., Inc., talked with Dr. Saad about the changes she's made at IMPATH and her plans for the future of the company.

Carrie Schwab Pomerantz: I have read that you once thought that you would have the greatest impact on the world as a research scientist. What made you leave academia?

Anu D. Saad: As a young girl, I wanted to be a scientist. I was fascinated with the biological sciences from the time I was five or six years old. I stayed true to that goal for much of my life. But one of the things that I found when I was at Cornell is that the better you are at research, the more narrowly focused you must become. Frankly, I wanted something that was broader in scope. What interested me about IMPATH was that the company was taking the best scientific research and applying it to help people in a real-life setting.



Anu D. Saad,
chairman and CEO of IMPATH

When the chairman of my department received a query from a recruiter for IMPATH, he passed it on to me. Being the die-hard academic that I was at the time, I took it the wrong way, thinking, "Am I not good enough to stay in academia?"

At the same time I had several friends who were leaving academia to start biotech companies. They were very intelligent people who saw that they could do great things—maybe even have a greater impact on society—outside of academia.

Soon after joining IMPATH as scientific director, I came to see that unless you can bridge the gap between scientific discovery and application in real life, the research doesn't mean much.

Pomerantz: After you joined IMPATH as the scientific director, the company reportedly stumbled badly in diversifying its products. Losses mounted, and the CEO resigned in 1993. At age 37, you got the job and quickly turned the company around, steering it to profitability in just a year and taking it public in 1996. With little direct business experience, how did you achieve this success?

Saad: The main characteristic of being CEO of any company is understanding the business. In this business, if you don't understand the science, the medicine, and the value of providing biologically relevant information, it doesn't matter how much business background you have. Nevertheless, the board of directors took a big risk in appointing me CEO, since I didn't have a background in business.

Pomerantz: Why do you think they took that risk? What strengths do you bring to the job?

Saad: More than anything else, I bring a very strong scientific background and a strong desire to apply science in a busi-

ness setting to achieve important medical goals. I also had a “secret weapon”: I am married to a really good economist, so I was aware of business principles and philosophies. Also, since I have a teaching background and IMPATH’s sales focus is educational, I can help our staff develop ways to teach clients how to make better decisions in order to help more patients.

Pomerantz: You led IMPATH to continue its cancer-only focus, which could be considered an unusual strategy.

Saad: When I was appointed CEO, the company didn’t have a clear-cut strategy. Early on in IMPATH’s life, there was a strong sense of urgency to expand our focus beyond cancer and use the same technology to help AIDS and other infectious-disease patients. We had to decide if we were a technology company or a disease-focused, problem-solving company.

We made the decision to focus the technology, data, and knowledge at our disposal on providing better treatment for

extremely important. We try to instill that on an ongoing basis. I also think that we have a real feeling of camaraderie and family.

Pomerantz: About a year ago you started IMPATH Predictive Oncology to help companies involved in drug discovery and the development of new oncology therapeutics. Can you explain a bit about your efforts in this area?

Saad: We can help the biopharmaceutical/genomics industry realize its full potential. Up until now, their business has been focused on discovery. The bottleneck at present is how to take the information and use it to make real drugs. Instead of focusing on blockbuster drugs to treat a large number of people, these companies are developing more targeted biological therapies, which means that they don’t need as many participants in their clinical studies. With clinical trials, the biggest challenge is identifying the right patients. We can help them

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cancer. Then we made strategic decisions to fulfill our clients’ needs and also to educate them. It’s not like selling one type of ink versus another. When so many patients are dying of cancer, the oncologists are extremely interested in and desperate for better knowledge. They depend on us to help them make better decisions. We give scientific talks to share important medical and technological changes. It’s very complicated selling something that most clients don’t even know they need.

Pomerantz: IMPATH provides patient-specific information to almost 8,000 physicians in about 2,000 hospitals and 500 oncology offices nationwide. How do you plan to increase your market penetration?

Saad: By continuing our 90% educational/10% sales focus. Though we don’t have direct contact with patients, our work this year will impact the lives of 200,000 people with cancer. I cannot overemphasize the importance of that. In the early, early days, when we were all in one room, printed out on an old dot-matrix printer was the quote, “At the end of every specimen, there’s a patient waiting for an answer.” This continues to keep us focused.

Pomerantz: Company performance is achieved through excellent employees. How do you motivate your associates to give their all?

Saad: It may sound trite, but there’s a real feeling at all levels of the company that what we’re doing is

by screening a daily caseload of 700-plus patients to look for matches as the companies need them. IMPATH has an extensive tissue repository, and we are currently tracking two million patients nationwide, collecting data on all sorts of cancers. We’re also developing software to help doctors determine which of their patients might be eligible for trials.

Pomerantz: What do you believe will be IMPATH’s greatest challenge within the next few years?

Saad: Our biggest challenge will be to help the biopharmaceutical/genomics companies get used to bringing more drugs to the marketplace a lot faster in order to reduce expenses—both for them and for the consumer. As IMPATH achieves access to more cancer patients and their physicians, we can help targeted drugs become available to more patients—and save more lives. ◀

Fast Facts

Company Name: IMPATH Inc.

Headquarters: New York, New York

Established: 1988 (IPO in 1996 on Nasdaq: IMPH)

of Employees: 1,100

2000 revenues: \$138.2 million (a 62% increase over 1999)

2001 fiscal highlights: Revenue up 41% from year ago; June 30 marked 30th record-breaking quarter