

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT



Nadja Falk, M.D.
Associate Professor of Pathology

University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, NM

A rekindled passion for pathology

Nadja Falk, M.D., thought she wanted to be a reconstructive plastic surgeon. But two years into her categorical general surgery residency at St. Vincent's Hospital Manhattan, she decided to explore research in the field. MD Anderson, in her hometown of Houston, offered a postdoctoral fellowship with faculty leading research in plastic surgery and biomedical engineering – a combination she felt perfectly complemented her desired career track.

“During the fellowship, the research was focused on different materials for abdominal hernia repair,” Falk says. “One of the steps was to look at the materials in a microscope in order to determine the amount of various inflammatory cells migrating into the material. This re-exposure to pathology rekindled my passion for the field, and I was grateful to have had this experience for two years.”

After she finished her fellowship in 2009, Falk continued studying pathology through an anatomic and clinical pathology residency at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston Medical School, now known as McGovern Medical School UTHealth Houston.

“The research experience during my postdoctoral fellowship was invaluable for this residency, which was research focused. I had had ample experience researching, writing abstracts and manuscripts, and presenting at national meetings,” says Falk.

But even after her residency at UTHealth ended in 2013, Falk felt she had more to learn, so she returned to MD Anderson. This time, she completed two more education and training programs: a year-long cytopathology fellowship and a year-long fellowship in surgical pathology.

“During my surgical and cytopathology fellowships at MD Anderson, I honed my pathologic knowledge and paid astute detail to how to write reports and relay information to clinicians in a clear, concise manner according to how my attendings were doing this.

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This has stayed with me in my clinical practice and helped in my reports and interactions with clinicians,” says Falk.

“Additionally, during the two fellowships, I was able to publish two manuscripts: one in cytopathology concerning mediastinal neuroendocrine tumors and one in surgical pathology about pulmonary salivary gland-type tumors,” adds Falk.

Falk now serves as an associate professor of Pathology and program director for the cytopathology fellowship at the University of New Mexico. In her role, Falk is involved in several grant-funded interdepartmental projects about breast and gynecologic pathology in addition to artificial intelligence. She feels the decision to complete one postdoctoral and two clinical fellowships at MD Anderson can be felt in her role as cytopathology fellowship director, where she incorporates similar teaching and case sessions into her mentorship as was done for her during her time at MD Anderson.

“Training at MD Anderson is unparalleled in its breadth and complexity of pathology cases, and there were many projects and mentors with which to work. It really prepared me for academic practice,” says Falk. She often hears the voices of her MD Anderson mentors in her head guiding her in differential diagnoses, the art of writing well-written pathology reports, and devising project topics and following through with them in a timely manner.

While every trainee’s experience is unique, Falk had advice to share for those considering or are currently training at MD Anderson.

“There is no place in the world like MD Anderson. It is an amazing place to train, and you will learn so much and make lifelong friends and connections. The training is intense and stressful, but in the end, you will be such a stronger, more knowledgeable physician,” says Falk.

In her free time, you can find Falk spending time with her two daughters, biking, hiking or playing the harp.

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