

Tar Heel Footprints in Health Care

Recognizing unusual and often unsung contributions of individual citizens who have made health care for North Carolinians more accessible and of higher quality

Rebecca Socolar, MD



Rebecca Socolar was a tireless advocate for children and families, with a particular interest in improving the lives of people affected by personal violence, interfamilial violence, and child maltreatment.

Socolar was a high school valedictorian and graduated magna cum laude from Bryn Mawr College before earning her medical degree from the University of North Carolina (UNC)-Chapel Hill School of Medicine. She worked in private practice for a few years after completing the pediatrics residency program at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, PA). Later, a fellowship at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine (Bronx, NY) and coursework in public health cultivated an interest in multidisciplinary approaches to addressing child maltreatment. As Socolar's husband Joshua reflected, "All the way through, she saw her particular contributions as part of a larger—not just medical—effort to give all kids a fair chance at a good life."

A deep understanding of the complexity of child abuse meant that no aspect of child maltreatment was neglected in Socolar's efforts. "She worked to develop interventions that would break the cycle of abuse," according to Helen Snow, director of health affairs at the UNC Office of University Development. "She sought to help children survive abuse and then to help prevent them from later becoming abusers. Her work was about including the whole family in these efforts." Socolar led the push to start the UNC Hospitals' Beacon Program for Families and Children, which provides evaluation, counseling, and coordinated care for people who have experienced fear, physical danger, or abuse. A one-time codirector of the Beacon Program, she also served as director of the North Carolina Child Medical Evaluation Program, a cooperative effort of the School of Medicine's Department of Pediatrics, the North Carolina legislature, state and local departments of social services, and health care professionals, which provides diagnostic assessments of children suspected to be victims of child abuse. Socolar and colleagues founded the North Carolina Child Treatment Program, supported by The Duke Endowment, the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, and the Governor's Crime Commission, on recognition of the need for evidence-based mental health treatment among sexually abused children and their nonoffending caregivers, particularly in North Carolina's underserved northeastern counties.

Socolar's kind, yet resolute disposition contributed to the effectiveness of her efforts. "Rebecca was visionary and absolutely dedicated...and had a quiet and deliberate way about her that always inspired confidence," said Snow. "Rebecca was known for her enormously big laugh," remarked Dana Hagele, a colleague and mentee of Socolar's. "But she was super tough when it came to advocating for families and children. A few months before she died, Socolar got out of bed and drove herself to Raleigh to present before the General Assembly. She was exhausted and in pain but felt in obligation to ask for funds to provide treatment for children who had experienced abuse and neglect."

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Her research and policy activities were complemented by her passion for mentoring junior faculty working in the area of child maltreatment. Socolar was a posthumous recipient of the Kimberly Crews Award from the North Carolina Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, for providing significant support to other professionals working to detect and treat child maltreatment. She was also a founding member of the Ray Helfer Society, an honorary society that promotes education and training on child abuse and neglect, endeavors to improve research and clinical practice in the area of child maltreatment, and heightens awareness of the field of child abuse and neglect.

Socolar had many roles in her personal life and career—wife, mother, and friend, and physician, mentor, and advocate—and fulfilled each with compassion, understanding, and dedication. In 2009, during her professional prime, she died after a battle with cancer. Her contributions continue to influence policies and programs that promote the well-being of North Carolina's children. NCMJ

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