

## Marie-France Demierre, skin cancer specialist; at 43

By Bryan Marquard, Globe Staff | April 18, 2010



If Dr. Marie-France Demierre could have augmented each day and added hours to a life that ended at 43, it's difficult to imagine how she would have chosen to spend those precious extra minutes. She embraced so many aspects of life with equal fervor.

Colleagues considered her a rising star in Boston's medical community.

Professionally precocious, she was only 31 when she began directing the skin oncology program at Boston Medical Center.

Dr. Demierre lectured around the world about melanoma and the dangers of unprotected exposure to the sun, yet still found the hours to care deeply for her patients, some of whom suffered life-ending skin cancers.

At the same time, she was more of a presence in the lives of her two young children than anyone might expect from someone in such a high-profile position.

"She walked faster than most people walked and she talked faster than most people spoke because she had so much that she wanted to do and accomplish," said Dr. Rhoda Alani, dermatologist-in-chief at the medical center and head of the dermatology department.

"She wanted to take everything out of every second of the day."

A few hours after Dr. Demierre and her husband had dinner with friends last Sunday, she began suffering severe abdominal pain.

Dr. Demierre, who lived in Quincy, died Tuesday in Boston Medical Center and tests are pending to determine the cause.

"At a young age, Dr. Demierre rose to become a recognized national leader in skin oncology," said

Dr. Howard Koh, who recruited her to succeed him when he left the medical center to become the state's public health commissioner.

"With tremendous energy, she tirelessly cared for patients and sought innovative and life-saving treatments for each and every one of them," said Koh, now assistant secretary for health in the US Department of Health and Human Services, in a statement issued through the medical center.

"We are shocked by her passing, but also enormously grateful for her life of inspiration and passion."

Dr. Demierre encouraged state lawmakers to create tougher regulations for tanning salons and she documented the heightened incidence of melanomas among young women who use tanning beds.

She also volunteered to conduct annual skin cancer screenings for the Boston Red Sox. The team honored her at Fenway Park a year ago as a Medical All-Star.

At the medical center, meanwhile, she guided a program for treating patients with illnesses such as melanomas and cutaneous T-cell lymphoma — a group of lymphomas that primarily affect the skin.

"She took care of the most complicated cases in dermatology," Alani said.

"This was very unusual. Most dermatologists don't have patients who die, but she took care of patients who had to be admitted to the hospital with their conditions.

"She gave them both excellent medical care and incredible compassion. It was an unusual niche area of dermatology that she embraced, and she was a leader in it."

Born in Montreal, Dr. Demierre was the older of two children and spent part of her childhood in Martigny, Switzerland, about 90 miles north of Ivrea, Italy, the boyhood home of her future husband, Maurizio Cattaneo.

"She lived literally one mountain away from me for a few years during our youth," he said. "I often joked with her that we passed by each other when my family was buying chocolates on the Swiss side of the border."

Dr. Demierre's family returned to Montreal, where in high school she switched to an accelerated program.

At 19 she began medical studies at McGill University in Montreal.

She graduated in 1991, the same year she married Cattaneo, a doctoral student at McGill.

"I met her in an elevator," he said.

"One smile cemented the relationship."

After an internship and residency in Montreal, Dr. Demierre spent a year on a dermatology fellowship at Boston University School of Medicine, where she met Koh.

In 1997, not long after she began a private practice in Montreal, Koh persuaded her to return.

She also was a professor at the BU School of Medicine.

“Howard Koh went on to greater things and we were all expecting that Marie-France would follow the same path,” Alani said.

“He was her mentor, and then she took over and did great things with this program.”

Last year, the Women’s Dermatologic Society honored Dr. Demierre with its president’s award.

“Her work for her was a mission, it was a vocation,” Cattaneo said. “She was somebody who had this incredible need to care for people. That was priority number one.”

The only time her Dr. Demierre held her compassion in check, it seemed, was when she competed in sports.

“She was mean, mean hockey player,” her husband said with a chuckle, and she could be just as tough on the tennis court.

“They call her the wall: Nothing goes past her.”

French was Dr. Demierre’s first language, and she also was fluent in English and Italian.

Because she wanted her daughter, Françoise, and her son, Christian, to speak, read, and write in more than one language, she enrolled them at the International School of Boston, where Dr. Demierre and her husband were leaders of the PTO.

“She was so busy all the time, and yet wasn’t removed,” said Joyce Latapie, who teaches at the school.

“A lot of parents who work don’t really know what’s going on. She knew all the kids’ names, she knew their parents, and she made it a point to come to every event. If it was on her calendar, she was there, applauding and filming and taking pictures.”

Dr. Harold Picken, a friend and physician, said Dr. Demierre “had an ability to make every little event she was involved in feel like a special occasion. She had an ability to be delighted and excited about things that others might feel small, like a special item of food or a glass of wine.”

“Whenever there was a department party, she was always the first person on the dance floor,” Alani

said. “That’s who she was.”

Last week, Alani went to Dr. Demierre’s office to assist in gathering her belongings.

One wall was filled to overflowing with awards and accolades. On a chair sat a stack of awards that had yet to find wall space.

“She was so young and had done all these things,” Alani said.

“One part of you feels her life was way too short, but she didn’t take a second for granted, and she was always excited about the next thing on her plate.

“She was a really special person. She was exuberant, she was passionate. She was sunshine.”

In addition to her husband, daughter, and son, Dr. Demierre leaves her mother, Winny Schansman of Groningen, the Netherlands; and her brother, Jean-Luc of Montreal.

A funeral Mass was said yesterday and burial will be at a later date.

[http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/obituaries/articles/2010/04/18/marie\\_france\\_demierre\\_skin\\_cancer\\_speci alist\\_at\\_43/](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/obituaries/articles/2010/04/18/marie_france_demierre_skin_cancer_speci alist_at_43/)