

JOSEPH IMPERATO, MD '80

Planned Exit

Joseph Imperato, MD '80, is helping physicians navigate their transition away from the profession that defines them.



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Joseph Imperato, MD '80, jokes that he “failed retirement” the first time. After four decades in radiation oncology, most of it spent building a respected breast cancer practice in the Chicago area, he stepped away from clinical medicine in his early 60s, only to pivot almost immediately into a leadership role at an insurance company. Nine years later, at age 70, he’s preparing to retire again—this time for real. But if history is any guide, Dr. Imperato isn’t wired to simply stop. Instead, he’s turned his attention to a new kind of practice: helping other physicians navigate what comes next.

“What’s wrong with us?” Imperato recalls wondering after attending an

Upstate reunion where only a fraction of his classmates had fully retired. Many were still working full time; others had scaled back but hadn’t stepped away. The realization stuck. For a profession defined by long training, deep expertise, and personal sacrifice, stepping away can feel less like a milestone and more like a loss.

Imperato understands the tensions many doctors feel about retirement. Raised in the Bronx and drawn to medicine from an early age, he followed a clear path—chemistry pre-med at Holy Cross, then Upstate Medical University, where a chance assignment in radiation oncology changed the course of his career. Mentored by a dynamic department chair and drawn to the field’s blend of science and patient care, he went on to train at Harvard before briefly returning to Syracuse as an attending. A second stroke of serendipity took him to Illinois, where he built a long career centered on breast cancer treatment and helped advance the use of lumpectomy paired with radiation therapy.

Over time, his work expanded beyond the clinic. A Fellow of the American College of Radiology, he held a faculty appointment at Northwestern for nearly three decades and served in leadership roles, including as president of the Illinois division of the American Cancer Society. Public speaking, media appearances, and teaching became familiar terrain, skills that now support his latest endeavor.

Imperato decided to explore the retirement conundrum in his role as chair of the senior and retired section of the American College of Radiology. The result is a podcast that tackles the realities physicians face as they approach retirement. Launched in March, “Planning for the Future: Building Your Retirement Path” provides practical information in a format that is accessible on-demand. Although developed for the radiologist community, Imperato says the content is relevant for all physicians.

Early episodes focus on what Imperato sees as the central challenge: the loss of identity that can accompany leaving medicine. For physicians, the profession is rarely just a job—it’s a calling reinforced over decades of training and practice. Walking away can feel disorienting, even frightening. The podcast explores ways to bridge that gap, from teaching and mentoring to building new communities and routines.

It also dives into the less discussed logistics of retirement: financial planning, managing debt, preparing wills and estates, and maintaining physical health. Imperato is particularly attuned to the practical missteps that can derail even the best-laid plans. He points to the irony of lifelong professionals suddenly embracing new physical hobbies without preparation—sometimes with painful results—and brings in experts to guide listeners through those transitions.

For Imperato, the podcast is as much personal as it is professional. As he prepared to step away from full-time work himself, he was already planning his next chapter: teaching medical students, mentoring future oncologists, and continuing to engage with the field in a more flexible way. It’s a model he believes can help others reframe retirement not as an end, but as a shift.

That perspective is grounded in a simple but often overlooked truth: time is finite, and health is not guaranteed. “You do want to enjoy this time while you’re in good health,” he says, encouraging colleagues to travel, reconnect with family, and pursue long-deferred interests. “After years spent caring for others, physicians owe themselves the same consideration.”

—Renée Gearhart Levy