

Renowned supportive oncology expert to lead IU center

Apr 01, 2026



Christian "Chris" Nelson will lead the Walther Center for Supportive Oncology at the Indiana University Melvin and Bren Simon Comprehensive Cancer Center. | Photo courtesy Christian Nelson

INDIANAPOLIS — An internationally recognized supportive oncology expert has joined the [Indiana University Melvin and Bren Simon Comprehensive Cancer Center](#).

Christian "Chris" Nelson, PhD, a clinical psychologist, has been named the director of the [Walther Center for Supportive Oncology](#) at the cancer center, effective April 1. He will also be the Walther Senior Professor in Supportive Oncology and professor of psychiatry and medicine at IU School of Medicine. In addition, he'll serve as chief resilience officer at the cancer center.

As Walther Center director, Nelson plans to build a national example of compassionate, research-based supportive care for people with cancer. He explained that the Walther Center's focus areas, which will work together and often overlap, are:

- Palliative care: Managing symptoms like pain, fatigue, nausea and helping with advanced care planning
- Psycho-oncology: Supporting emotional and mental health, including depression and anxiety, and developing coping strategies
- Integrative medicine/rehabilitation: Helping with symptoms and wellness through treatments like acupuncture, exercise, meditation, nutrition and music therapy

"Supportive oncology is anything that's not direct cancer treatment," Nelson said. "It's essentially organizing those three buckets — palliative care, psycho-oncology, and integrative medicine — to help patients."

He pointed out that palliative care, which is often thought of as end-of-life care, is about helping treat symptoms such as pain, fatigue, and sleep disorders. Research shows that the sooner palliative care is introduced, the better the outcome for the patient, according to Nelson.

During his career, Nelson has specialized in improving the quality of life of patients treated for genitourinary malignancies and older adults with cancer. His research focuses on the impact of cancer on quality of life in prostate and geriatric cancer patients, and the development of new talk therapies for these patients. His research also includes sexual dysfunction after treatments, cognitive effects of hormonal therapy in prostate cancer patients, and emotional well-being in Black men with prostate cancer.

Nelson was most recently the chief of the psychiatry service and attending psychologist in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York. He was also a professor of psychology in the Department of Psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medicine.

As a researcher, his work has been supported by the National Institutes of Health, and he has launched independent research programs in male sexual medicine in prostate cancer and in the psycho-oncology of aging and cancer. He has published more than 180 research articles.

He earned his bachelor's degree in speech communication from the University of Minnesota and a master's degree from the Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota. He earned a master's and doctorate degree in clinical psychology from Long Island University.

"Dr. Nelson brings tremendous supportive oncology experience to IU," [Kelvin Lee, MD](#), director of the IU Simon Comprehensive Cancer Center, said. "Under his leadership, the Walther Center will help patients and their families and transform how we approach supportive oncology by uniting research and clinical care."

The Walther Center for Supportive Oncology stems from a transformative \$14 million gift from the Walther Cancer Foundation to IU in 2018. It encompasses both research and clinical care. Cancer center investigators Shelley Johns, PsyD, ABPP, and Sheri Robb, PhD, previously named Walther Scholar in Psycho-Oncology and Walther Professor of Supportive Oncology, respectively, bring research expertise that includes improving the physical health and psychological well-being of adults with cancer as well as the impact of music therapy on children and adolescents with cancer. Tarah Ballinger, MD, the Vera Bradley Foundation Scholar in Breast Cancer Research at IU School of Medicine and a cancer center physician-scientist, is the medical director of the Walther Center. The

clinical component was developed in partnership with IU Health. As such, Dr. Nelson's recruitment was additionally supported in 2025 by a \$2.25 million gift from Walther Cancer Foundation to the IU Health Foundation that was matched by IU Health.

"We are excited to welcome Dr. Nelson to his new leadership role at the Walther Center," said Thomas W. Grein, president and CEO of the Walther Cancer Foundation, Inc. "He brings a clear and compelling vision for the center — one that we share and fully support."

About the Walther Cancer Foundation

The Walther Cancer Foundation is named for the late Joseph E. Walther, MD, a 1936 graduate of IU School of Medicine and the founder of the former not-for-profit Winona Memorial Hospital. After the death of his beloved wife, Mary Margaret, from colon cancer, Dr. Walther devoted his life and work to funding cancer research. In 1985, Dr. Walther sold Winona Memorial Hospital and established the Walther Cancer Institute, a medical research organization. In 2007, the institute merged into the Walther Cancer Foundation, an independent, private grant-making institution. In addition to investing in basic research, the foundation supports research programs that test new therapies and focus on human behaviors as well as ways patients and their families respond to a diagnosis of cancer.

About the Indiana University School of Medicine

The [IU School of Medicine](#) is the largest medical school in the U.S. and is annually ranked among the top medical schools in the nation by U.S. News & World Report. The school offers high-quality medical education, access to leading medical research and rich campus life in nine Indiana cities, including rural and urban locations consistently recognized for livability. According to the Blue Ridge Institute for Medical Research, the IU School of Medicine ranks No. 15 in 2025 National Institutes of Health funding among all public medical schools in the country.

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