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Dr. Tifft received her MD and PhD from the University of Texas Health Science Center and Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences at Houston. She trained in pediatrics at the University of Texas and Johns Hopkins Hospital, and did her clinical genetics fellowship in the Inter-institute Medical Genetics Training Program at the National Institutes of Health.

Cynthia joined the faculty at Children's National Medical Center in Washington, D.C. in 1991 and became Chair of the Division of Genetics and Metabolism in 1996. In 2009 she was recruited to the National Human Genome Research Institute at NIH to become Deputy Clinical Director and to head the pediatric portion of the NIH Undiagnosed Diseases Program. With expansion of the UDP to the Undiagnosed Disease Network, she chairs the Clinical Protocols Working Group that has designed the phenotyping strategy for UDN patients across the USA. Dr. Tifft's research interests for many years have been lysosomal disorders affecting the central nervous system, particularly Tay-Sachs, GM1 gangliosidosis, and related disorders.