Fellowship Program to Develop the Next Generation of Oncology Nurses

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An oncology nursing fellowship program for undergraduate nursing students has the potential to help develop a much-needed talent pool for the next generation of oncology nurses. By raising awareness of the value of this program, the Oncology Nursing Society can help foster expansion of this program nationally to help address the growing need for oncology nurses. Improving awareness about this program could lead to the establishment of similar fellowship programs at other cancer hospitals and undergraduate nursing schools. This program provides an opportunity for experienced oncology nurses to serve as preceptors and program managers at leading cancer hospitals, select and mentor program participants, and, ultimately, recruit and develop future mentors for the program.

At a Glance
• Oncology nursing is a very specialized and important field that could benefit from more emphasis at the undergraduate education level.
• Leading cancer hospitals and undergraduate nursing schools can play a significant role in helping to develop the next generation of oncology nurses.
• The Susan D. Flynn Oncology Nursing Fellowship is a model program with the potential to help address the need for more and better-prepared oncology nurses.

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My wonderful wife, Susan, lost her courageous battle with ovarian cancer in 2013. During our challenging journey together in the face of this terrible disease, we witnessed the invaluable work and incredible compassion of oncology nurses. In particular, I want to acknowledge the extraordinary care provided by Donna Coletti, MD, medical director of palliative care at Greenwich Hospital in Greenwich, CT, and Linda Kurfehs, BS, RN, and Judy Spangler, BS, RN, two outstanding hospice nurses. In Susan’s loving memory, and as a tribute to the critical front line of cancer caregivers, I decided to do something proactive and impactful.

I was fortunate to learn about the Carol A. Ghiloni Oncology Nursing Student Nurse Fellowship program (Coakley & Ghiloni, 2009) at Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) in Boston, named in honor of a widely respected oncology nurse at MGH. At my first meeting with Carol in September 2013, it quickly became apparent that the unique and highly successful Ghiloni Oncology Nursing Student Nurse Fellowship was an ideal program to emulate. To learn as much as possible about this program and others (Childress & Gorder, 2012) and to help ensure its sustainability, I agreed to sponsor its expansion at MGH from two to four fellows in 2014. As a result, I have been able to partner with MGH and closely collaborate with Carol on the development of a similar program.

With Carol’s guidance, I established the Susan D. Flynn Oncology Nursing Fellowship Program (www.sdfondp.com) in 2014. Although originally intended as a one-person pilot program at Greenwich Hospital, it was met with such enthusiasm by the other hospitals and undergraduate nursing schools I contacted that I ended up sponsoring nine interns at four pilot program hospitals, including Greenwich Hospital; Stamford Hospital in Stamford, Connecticut; Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, Massachusetts; and Wentworth-Douglass Hospital in Dover, New Hampshire. The initial fellows were competitively selected from Boston College in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts; Fairfield University in Fairfield, Connecticut; and Saint Anselm College in Manchester, New Hampshire. Based on the success of these pilot programs, I expanded the program in 2015 to 24 fellows at nine cancer hospitals (in addition to my continuing co-sponsorship of the MGH program), and added several other top undergraduate nursing schools. Over time, I hope to expand this program nationally.

New hospital program partners in 2015 included New York Presbyterian Hospital; Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia; Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland; and Winship Cancer Institute at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Additional participating nursing schools include Molloy College in Rockville Centre, New
York; the University of Pennsylvania; Villanova University in Pennsylvania; Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore; Emory University in Atlanta; and Sacred Heart University in Fairfield.

Program Objectives

The objectives of the Susan D. Flynn Oncology Nursing Fellowship Program are to:

• Stimulate the career interest and foster the professional development of potential oncology nurses.
• Raise the visibility of oncology nursing as a career choice and provide a vehicle to expose the best and brightest students from undergraduate nursing programs to this critically important field.
• Promote effective partnerships between the leading cancer hospitals and top nursing programs to help attract and develop the next generation of oncology nurses.

Methods

One method to ensure that this program achieves its objectives is to structure and implement a well-defined process to provide fellows with a comprehensive scope of observational exposures and learning experiences in oncology nursing. To accomplish this, I provide participating hospitals with written guidelines on the intended scope and structure of the program. Clinical exposure to all aspects of oncology nursing is provided during an eight-week immersion program, including typical oncology nurses’ roles and responsibilities, key policies and procedures, treatment plans, infusion services, radiation services, clinical research and clinical trials, hospice roles and services, palliative care services, and patient support programs. Fellows are paired with experienced oncology nursing preceptors and are mentored in the delivery of compassionate patient care.

Another method is to enrich the internship experience by requiring fellows to complete and present an evidence-based project involving some aspect of oncology nursing. Pertinent training is provided, fellows are assisted with the selection and research of their project topic (if needed), and are required to present the findings of their research project at the program graduation ceremony (to nursing staff, fellows’ parents, and the program sponsor); they also are responsible to communicate the benefits of their fellowship experience to the junior class at their respective schools.

Another method is to partner with cancer hospitals and their associated undergraduate nursing programs (i.e., academic partners) to provide fellows with the best possible oncology nursing education and experience. A pilot program is conducted in the first year at all new participating hospitals to evaluate its effectiveness. Formal program reviews also are conducted with the respective program managers prior to the program’s inception to ensure adherence with the expected program elements. I identify and communicate observed best practices involving this program at all participating hospitals to foster continuous improvement in its overall effectiveness. Hospital program managers are responsible for the competitive selection of the best-qualified fellows for their respective programs and for conducting a formal program evaluation (including interviews with each fellow) at the conclusion of all pilot programs and annually thereafter. Subject to an acceptable pilot program review, I make a five-year funding commitment to the respective host hospital to help ensure the sustainability of this fellowship program.

Program fellows to obtain oncology nursing positions with leading cancer hospitals.

Formal surveys, developed with input from the fellows and nursing staff, are completed by the program managers at each participating hospital using a common evaluation methodology, and the results—including suggestions for improvement—are reviewed with me. In addition, I personally interview each fellow following their completion of the program.

Findings

Participating fellows universally state that this program bolstered their confidence in becoming a nurse, enabled them to learn a substantial amount about oncology nursing and get comfortable in an oncology setting, and provided the opportunity to develop meaningful patient relationships. To date, virtually all of the 37 fellows I have sponsored have affirmed their interest in pursuing oncology nursing, and several already have started their oncology nursing careers.

Participating hospitals view this specialized program as a valuable recruiting tool for top oncology nursing talent and have enthusiastically supported it. All of my hospital partners have committed well-qualified members of their respective nursing staff to implement and manage this program (including several skilled preceptors who serve as mentors). The candidate selection process has been rigorously and effectively handled by key hospital personnel; in all cases, outstanding fellows have been competitively selected and close relationships have been successfully cultivated between the fellows and the hospitals’ nursing staff members. I have been repeatedly told that this program also has energized the oncology nursing staff at the participating hospitals.

Participating nursing schools have actively promoted this unique internship opportunity to their students, and many are using this program to strengthen their academic relationships with their respective hospital clinical partners. Surprisingly, comparable fellowship programs involving the country’s undergraduate nursing
schools are rare (unlike the widespread availability of internships for business students). Involvement in this relatively unique program is a win-win-win for the nursing schools, participating students, and hospitals involved. This program provides a valuable new dimension to existing academic relationships between several of the leading undergraduate nursing schools and their clinical partners.

Significant demand exists for this oncology nursing development program. In 2015, a record 132 students applied for the four fellowship spots available at MGH, and a record 25 students applied for the two fellowship spots available at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. Other participating hospitals have experienced similar high interest levels for the limited number of available fellowship positions.

This specialized resource development program has the potential to help address the growing need for oncology nurses nationally. The fellowship program is a high-value, high-impact—yet relatively low-cost—program (about a $5,000 stipend per fellow for the eight-week program) and is very scalable (i.e., easily expanded). Hospitals absorb the cost of the staff time required by this program by their respective program participants (primarily program manager and certain nursing staff members). Several other leading cancer hospitals and undergraduate nursing schools have expressed interest in participating in this program. As a result, I plan to add four new hospital partners and four additional nursing school participants in 2016.

Conclusion

Despite the growing need for oncology nurses, most undergraduate nursing students get very limited (if any) exposure—academically and clinically—to oncology nursing. By fostering a collaborative training effort with the leading cancer hospitals and undergraduate nursing schools, oncology nursing education can be significantly improved and more aspiring nurses can be attracted to this important field. The Susan D. Flynn Oncology Nursing Fellowship program, whose aim is to attract, inspire, and support the professional development of the next generation of oncology nurses, is a cost-effective and demonstrated vehicle to help do so. With the assistance and support of the Oncology Nursing Society and other interested parties, this fellowship program—and potentially others like it—can be used to help meet the need for more and better-prepared oncology nurses.

References


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