Connecting Cancer Researchers with a Local Cancer Community

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Objectives
- To connect researchers-in-training with cancer patients/survivors in order to make each group feel more comfortable with one another.
- To train researchers-in-training to communicate about their work in lay language.
- To educate researchers-in-training about the human side of cancer and its treatment (e.g., side effects and costs of cancer care).

Community members
- Learn that “cancer is really complex.”
- Become champions of cancer research and cancer researchers.
- Become engaged in cancer advocacy at a national level (AACR, ASCO, San Antonio Breast Cancer Symposium, Project LEAD).
- Serve on research review panels (Dept. of Defense).

Doctoral students/postdocs
- Often have never talked with a person with cancer.
- Increasingly understand that engaging with interested non-scientists needs to be part of their professional development.

Ongoing seminars
- Designed to connect trainees with community members and to discuss cancer in lay language.
- Have met at least monthly (during academic year) for past five years.
- Eventually became part of the Cornell curriculum as a one-credit class.
- Combination of guest lectures, student presentations on topics suggested by community members (e.g., what’s the science behind the blood-brain barrier?), and workshops designed to teach science communication skills to the students.

Practical suggestions for creating a collaboration on your campus

Finding community members
- Any large research university will have cancer patients and survivors on staff who are interested in learning more about cancer and in nurturing the next generation of cancer researchers. Engage them.
- Welcome family members as well. Their perspective is just as important.
- It’s easy to begin with a session in which survivors/family members share their personal experiences with the trainees.

Make it a big tent
- Many universities engaged in basic cancer research don’t make an effort to connect students from different academic disciplines.
- Hearing from cancer patients cuts across disciplines and connects students who otherwise may not meet one another.
- Invite everyone.

Observations
- Connecting scientists and advocates doesn’t have to be complicated.
- There’s no single right way to do it.
- Don’t get hung up on defining what an advocate is or what their role should be.
- Make it an on-going collaboration. Students, departments, and principal investigators become interested and involved at different points in time.
- Engage particularly enthused students to help to coordinate the program.

Collaborating organizations and individuals

The Cancer Resource of the Finger Lakes (CRCFL) provides information, support and community for individuals affected by cancer who live in and around Ithaca, NY. (www.crcfl.net)

Cornell University is a major research university based in Ithaca. The Meinig School of Biomedical Engineering and the Department of Biomedical Sciences in the College of Veterinary Medicine are the academic units primarily engaged in this project, but other units are increasingly involved.

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