

# Every Step Along the Way

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BY [ASHLEY FESTA](#) ON JULY 29, 2015 · [FEATURES](#), [SUMMER 2015](#)

*Illustration by Oliver Weiss*

## **Flynn Fellowship honors oncology nurses by helping more of them hit the ground running**

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For both, a wide range of procedures becomes part and parcel of every day. Whether it's a diagnosis, prep and recovery from chemotherapy or radiation therapy, pre- and post-surgery, pain management, blood draws, biopsies, scans, or MRIs, the trials continue through to recovery or to hospice care. For the nurse, mastery of all these facets of care is essential to growth and improved patient outcomes. That's why a new partnering scholarship between the [School of Nursing](#) and [The Johns Hopkins Hospital](#) is so eagerly anticipated.



Frederick and Susan Flynn

The [Susan D. Flynn Oncology Nursing Fellowship Program](#) immerses students from top undergraduate nursing schools in applied oncology training. The hospital and School of Nursing will host two students in three semesters' worth of direct mentorship and hands-on participation that will accelerate their ability to hit the ground running when they begin work as full-time oncology nurses.

The fellowship's namesake, Susan Flynn, died of ovarian cancer in 2013 after a three-year battle with the disease. Inspired by the skill and compassion of nurses at the Connecticut hospital where his wife received care, Frederick C. Flynn Jr. created the fellowship to honor her memory and to help develop the next generation of oncology nurses across the nation.

“By partnering with the country’s leading hospitals and best nursing schools through this program, I believe we can inspire, attract, and foster the development of potential oncology nurses,” says Flynn, a retired business executive. “The preceptors in the program play a vital role by taking these aspiring nurses under their wing and acting as mentors.”

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The School of Nursing faculty and [Sidney Kimmel Comprehensive Cancer Center](#) practitioners committed to creating a customized training experience that allows Flynn Fellows to observe and participate in the full range of oncology specialties and responsibilities. The School of Nursing and hospital expect to select the first two students for the fellowship in September, according to Associate Professor [Jennifer Wenzel](#), PhD, RN.

Starting in their first semester, fellows will be immersed in oncology nursing, through both observation and hands-on activities. Fellows will rotate among all the challenges nurses have on any given day—for example, caring for one patient with a tracheotomy and another undergoing chemotherapy. They’ll learn about treatment side effects and how to interpret laboratory results, as well as assisting patients fresh out of surgery.

“These specific experiences will expose fellows to the continuum of care in oncology,” says Sharon Krumm, PhD, RN, director of nursing and clinical administrator at the Sidney Kimmel

Comprehensive Cancer Center. “We don’t think of caring for cancer patients as you would other patients. This isn’t about a single episode of care.”

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Flynn Fellows will experience the breadth of nurses’ involvement, collaborating with an interdisciplinary group of care providers who treat patients’ physical and emotional health. Not only will fellows interact with physicians, specialists, nurse practitioners, and hospital staff, they’ll also work with chaplains, social workers, nutritionists, pharmacists, psychiatrists, palliative caregivers, hospice workers, and researchers. At Hopkins Hospital, doctors or nurse practitioners may consult with nurses on clinical decisions. To be successful, fellows must hone their communication skills to work with all members of a patient’s care team. They must also adjust to the emotional and interpersonal nature of the job.

“One of the many rewards of taking care of patients with cancer is getting to know them over time,” Krumm says. “Our nurses have strong professional relationships with patients and their families. We also see the not-so-nice side of people—anger over a cancer diagnosis or a family member who’s angry over losing someone. The fellows will have the chance to learn how to manage these situations.”

Caitlin Brown is a 2015 Emory University graduate and Flynn Fellow recently hired to join Hopkins Hospital’s hematology oncology and blood and marrow transplant unit. Brown says she was so deeply moved by the emotional aspects of oncology nursing that she completed her fellowship research project on dignity therapy.

“When I first started the fellowship [at Massachusetts General Hospital], I’d had little oncology experience, and I didn’t know that amount of suffering existed in the world,” says Brown.

“Within the first two weeks, I saw three horrific and painful deaths, and I thought I’d made a mistake. But soon I realized that even though we can’t save every patient, it’s our job to maintain the patient’s dignity in life and in death.”

In the Undergraduate Research Honors course, Flynn Fellows at Johns Hopkins will also complete a project of their choice, grounded in their fellowship experiences and applicable in a real-world oncology setting.

“Being a fellow is not only an opportunity to gain clinical experience and to perfect the skills we’ve learned in school,” Brown says. “It’s also a chance to grow as a person and be able to relate to people who are sick and relying on you. You come to understand the human response to disease and treatment.”

It’s this attitude that Fred Flynn hopes to nurture through the fellowship.

Fellows will receive a **\$4,500 stipend** over the three semesters and guaranteed placement at The Johns Hopkins Hospital during the Transitions Practicum course, which all students take as preparation to shift from classroom to hospital. Faculty members do their best to match all students with a desired specialty, but Flynn Fellows will get a tailor-made experience.

“Oncology is a large specialty with lots of niches within the specialty,” says Wenzel. “Fellows will see the scope of oncology nursing and decide for themselves what they like best, a choice which will likely result in better job placement and satisfaction with their first position.”

She knows firsthand how important it is for nurses to familiarize themselves with a specialty before committing to it. “I had three clinical placements in pediatrics before I finally learned I didn’t want to be a pediatric nurse,” Wenzel says. “We’re helping students decide what they want and don’t want to do so they can shine in their career.”

She hopes this kind of educated decision-making will also help reduce burnout among oncology nurses, a high-energy profession, and diminish turnover rates at hospitals.

Wenzel, Krumm, and Flynn call the fellowship a win for all involved—the university, the hospital, nursing students, and ultimately the patients they serve.

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