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Nursing students reflect on a summer of learning

SEPTEMBER 2, 2015



*Frederick C. Flynn Jr. is pictured with Boston College William F. Connell School of Nursing students (left to right) Stephanie Vitone, Alicia Vautour, and Kaitlin Phelan. The students are graduates of a nursing fellowship program made possible by the Susan D. Flynn Oncology Nursing Training and Development Fund.
Photo by Sam Ogden*

For eight weeks, three nursing students learned about oncology nursing from the inside – observing clinicians at work, talking to care team members about their jobs and careers, and studying a particular area of interest. At an Aug. 27 luncheon in the Dana building, they gave presentations on their research and officially became graduates of a nursing fellowship program made possible by the Susan D. Flynn Oncology Nursing Training and Development Fund.

The three Boston College William F. Connell School of Nursing students who participated in the program at Dana-Farber/Brigham and Women's Cancer Center (DF/BWCC) this summer said the experience introduced them to aspects of nursing, and of patient care, beyond what they'd learned in the classroom.

"It's given me a whole new level of respect for oncology patients," said Stephanie Vitone, whose presentation focused on nurses' role in advocating for patients and teaching them about implanted ports. "I saw how treatment can take over their lives."

She spoke with patients who wished they'd decided to have a port implanted sooner. By educating patients and advocating for them, nurses can be the ones "who make sooner happen," Vitone said.

Kaitlin Phelan, whose presentation dealt with reducing cancer-related fatigue, said she came to appreciate the intensity of the bond between patients and their nurses, particularly at DF/BWCC where patients are assigned a primary nurse for the duration of their treatment. "It touched me how open patients are with nurses about what's going on in their lives," she said. "It was so profound, how you really can make a difference in their lives."

Her comments were echoed by Alicia Vautour, who spoke on how nurses can ensure that patients take oral chemotherapy medications as directed. "It's important to make time to talk with patients about how they're doing, and to make sure any side effects they're experiencing are manageable," she said.

The Susan D. Flynn Oncology Nursing Training and Development Fund was established in 2013 by Frederick C. Flynn Jr. in memory of his wife, who died of ovarian cancer, and in recognition of the excellent nursing care she received during her illness. Providing learning experiences to rising senior nursing school students at 10 hospitals, primarily in the Northeast, the program is intended to stimulate career interest and foster the professional development of potential oncology nurses.

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Pictured left to right are Allison Taylor, Cameron Sze, Stephanie Vitone, Michelle Ranaghan, Stephanie Benoit, Alicia Vautour, Cathy Rowland, and Kaitlin Phelan. Vitone, Vautour, and Phelan are graduates of a nursing fellowship program made possible by the Susan D. Flynn Oncology Nursing Training and Development Fund. Photo by Sam Ogden