



Inspiration

leads to **SUCCESS** for oncology nursing development

When Fred Flynn's wife, Susan, died of ovarian cancer after a three-year battle, one thing was certain. He knew he wanted to do something special to honor her memory while giving back to an organization that helped his family through a most difficult time.



Fred Flynn with his late wife, Susan

Flynn's inspiration to develop the Susan D. Flynn Oncology Nursing Fellowship Program began with the work of Donna Coletti, MD, medical director of Palliative Care at Greenwich Hospital, and her team who managed Susan's care during the last few weeks of her life in 2013. Flynn's abundant respect for the quality of care this interdisciplinary group of professionals provided is evident by how often he describes the value of their services.

In September of 2013, he developed and successfully led a fundraising program involving a "matching gift" pledge that generated over \$140,000 in support of palliative care. "I wanted to be sure that Dr. Coletti had the resources required to meet the growing patient services needs of the department and, in doing so, help raise awareness and broaden the donor base for her valuable function at the hospital," he said.

But Flynn still wondered what other support he could provide. An idea came to him one evening as he was watching television and browsing through a brochure about the Carol Ghiloni Oncology Nursing Fellowship at Massachusetts General Hospital.

Photo on opposite page:
Members of Greenwich Hospital's cancer care team joined Flynn (seated center) at a celebration for this year's graduating fellows Cristina Cioffi (seated, left of Flynn) and Jaclyn Di Yeso (seated, right of Flynn).



Flynn with Dr. Coletti

"It was like a light went on and I thought this is exactly what I want to do," he said. After meeting with Ghiloni and discussing the program, Flynn was inspired to do something similar, as palliative care is so integral to oncology services. He incorporated the framework of his idea into a detailed fellowship proposal for Greenwich Hospital, based on the Ghiloni program model.

About the Program

The Susan D. Flynn Oncology Nursing Fellowship Program, which has now spread to more than ten hospitals in several states, is intended to stimulate the career interest and foster professional development of potential oncology nurses. Core clinical education is enhanced through direct observation of oncology patient care and exposure to related duties and services that typify oncology nurses' valuable role as members of a healthcare team.

Undergraduate student nurse participants, who must be entering their senior year of studies, are competitively selected by host hospitals based on a rigorous evaluation of

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their academic and personal credentials and their interest level in oncology nursing. Accepted students receive an 18-month membership in the Oncology Nursing Society and are required to take its online "Cancer Basics" course as well as complete the End-of-Life Nursing Education Consortium's undergraduate online course. Prerequisite reading includes Dr. Atul Gawande's book, *Being Mortal*, for a foundation in palliative care.

During the eight-week summer session, interns from top undergraduate nursing schools are immersed in applied oncology training. They work alongside veteran nurses in all areas of cancer care, including medical and surgical oncology, clinical research, palliative care, infusion services, radiation therapy, home hospice services and patient support programs.

This first-hand experience allows future oncology nurses to begin their careers with broad clinical exposure and expert training in compassionate care. Opportunities to attend educational programs within the hospital and meetings with key staff members provide added learning experiences. In 2016, the program's scope was expanded to include a new pediatric oncology nursing track at three leading pediatric hospitals.

"More and more people are getting diagnosed with cancer, and thanks to advances in modern medicine, they are living longer," said Flynn. He explained that although this is good news, it's putting a strain on the healthcare system, which struggles to find well-qualified oncology nurses to meet increased demand while facing significant financial pressures.

"Student nurses typically don't get an introduction to oncology, let alone palliative care, until after they graduate," said Dr. Coletti. "That was the state of standard care before Fred started this program."

Without proper exposure to the field of oncology during primary nursing education, it is less likely for new graduates to choose a full-time career in oncology nursing upon entering the workforce. "Fred's program pushed the oncology nursing specialty to the forefront of undergraduate training so that students would have an opportunity to see this as an option for their careers much earlier on," added Dr. Coletti.

As a result, the Flynn fellowship program also serves as a pipeline for directing nursing students into different areas of oncology and specific hospital programs. Many interns return as permanent employees at their host

hospitals, replenishing a much-needed talent pool for the next generation of oncology nurses.

Former Flynn Fellow Begins her Career

At Greenwich Hospital, Emily Kopas, RN completed her fellowship in 2015 and has been working in inpatient oncology services since August of 2016. Calling her internship an "eye-opening experience that gave me invaluable skills," she praised the in-depth program for giving her "direct clinical experience in providing high-quality, compassionate and palliative care to oncology patients."

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Kopas shares a tender moment with a patient.

Kopas's interest in oncology began when her grandmother was treated for cancer at Greenwich Hospital, but it was through her internship that she fell in love with her work and decided on oncology nursing as a career path. "I am grateful to this day for the mentorship

and professional development opportunities Mr. Flynn provided me through this program," she said.

Kopas also said she was inspired by the dedicated and passionate oncology team at Greenwich Hospital for motivating her to pursue her career as an oncology nurse. She has already started classes to become a nurse practitioner and also plans to earn certifications in palliative care and chemotherapy.

Elements for Success

Flynn thanks the program's preceptors and nursing staff for being key to its success. Two years ago, he earmarked significant funds from his annual golf fundraiser to further invest in professional development for oncology nursing staff at Greenwich Hospital. Planned program elements include financial sponsorship of advanced education certifications, memberships in key professional organizations, attendance at leading industry conferences, and various technical and professional skills training.

"It was a way to reinvest in the people who make my program so successful," Flynn said. "Enthusiastic preceptors and highly skilled nursing staff serve as role models, mentors and coaches who foster extensive learning within the students."

Flynn has attended every fellowship graduation since 2014. "It's the best part," he said. "At the ceremony, the students present an evidence-based research project on some aspect of oncology to a room full of many subject matter experts, which always amazes me." He keeps in touch with all the program's graduates, many of whom are working as oncology nurses at their host hospitals or at some of the country's other leading cancer hospitals.

Flynn also credits the entire Greenwich Hospital organization for fully embracing the program, speaking highly of the strong commitment from top administrators to the entire nursing staff. "No one puts the kind of institutional commitment and ownership into the program that Greenwich Hospital does. Everyone is committed to the development of these aspiring oncology nurses.

It's a wonderful learning environment and I'm very grateful for that."

Kristina Capretti, RN, oncology program director, and Irene Piazza, RN, nurse manager of outpatient oncology services, oversee the fellowship program. "As mentors to the Flynn students, Irene and I are given the unique opportunity to invest in the education of future nurses and support the growth of oncology nursing care," said Capretti.

"It's energizing to the nursing staff because they're happy to see the hospital focusing on attracting the best and brightest successors and staff support for them," added Flynn. "It's a symbiotic relationship where everyone wins."

A concept that originally began to train one student intern at Greenwich Hospital continues growing to this day. The Susan D. Flynn Oncology Nursing Fellowship Program is currently available at more than 10 prominent hospitals, including New York Presbyterian, Stamford Hospital, Hospital of Philadelphia, UConn Health Center, Hartford Hospital, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, Children's National Medical Center, Boston Children's Hospital and Wentworth Douglass Hospital.

Since its inception in 2014, more than 100 aspiring nurses have graduated from the program and over 50 participants have already begun their oncology nursing careers. Thanks to Fred Flynn, what started as an idea to garner support for the important field of palliative care became a significant contribution to oncology nursing.

To donate to the Susan D. Flynn Fellowship Scholarship Fund at Greenwich Hospital and invest in the future of oncology nursing, please call 203-863-3863 or visit <https://giving.greenhosp.org/flynn-fellowship>.

Further information about the program can be found at <http://sdfondp.com/>. ■

Palliative Care at Greenwich Hospital

The Palliative Care Service at Greenwich Hospital is dedicated to the care and comfort of seriously ill patients and their families. Palliative care focuses on symptom and pain management and quality of life issues for adult patients with complex, chronic or terminal illnesses at any stage of the illness. Working to relieve symptoms, pain and stress, the palliative care team, led by Donna Coletti, MD, helps families understand the pros and cons of various procedures, medications and letting nature take its course.

The palliative care approach benefits patients with a variety of illnesses, from cancer, respiratory and heart ailments, to dementia and other neurologic conditions. Care is focused on the emotional, physical and spiritual support of the patient and their family.

To receive palliative care, call 203-863-4622 or speak with your doctor or nurse.