Nursing fellowship builds leaders in cancer care disparities research

Dana-Farber/Harvard Cancer Center (DF/HCC) and the University of Massachusetts (UMass) Boston are partnering to increase the ranks of seasoned nurse scientists and focus greater attention on a critical health care issue.

Since its inception in 2009, the Postdoctoral Research Fellowship in Cancer and Health Disparities at DF/HCC and UMass has been developing nurse leaders skilled in conducting clinical and population studies and other work focused on addressing inequities in cancer care based on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. The program, in which fellows train at DF/HCC under the mentorship of seasoned disparities investigators, is bolstering the research and community outreach efforts of partnering institutions and providing postdocs with skills needed to obtain academic jobs and pursue research grants.

“It has been a phenomenal success,” says Donna Berry, PhD, RN, director of the Phyllis F. Cantor Center for Research in Nursing and Patient Care Services at Dana-Farber and a leader of the fellowship, which is funded in part by a National Institutes of Health U54 grant. “Many of our trainees who completed their fellowship have achieved faculty appointments at excellent schools of nursing, where they are prepared to engage in research that addresses cancer disparities and educate future nurse scientists in this area.”

Another leader of the program, UMass Boston Associate Vice Provost for Research Laura Hayman, PhD, RN, says it is the only postdoctoral nursing program focused on cancer care disparities. “We recognized that there was a shortage of nurses prepared and focused in this critically important area,” Hayman explains. “Our graduates are growing the field while contributing to the science.”

UMass and DF/HCC offer the program over the course of either two academic years or three summers. Applicants selected are assigned a nurse science mentor and interdisciplinary co-mentor in their field of interest, and special efforts are made to recruit nurses of color.

“Having one of these fellows on our research team was a terrific experience on many levels,” says Tracy Balboni, MD, of Radiation Oncology and Palliative Care, who co-mentored fellow Virginia LeBaron, RN, PhD, from 2013-15. “Virginia brought a critical nursing perspective to our research within palliative care and psychosocial-spiritual issues in the cancer experience, and was a terrific mentor to trainees on our research team.”

LeBaron, now an assistant professor at the University of Virginia School of Nursing, has equal praise for the experience. “My work as a postdoc has laid the foundation for me to develop a fundable program of research and become an independent investigator,” she says. “I have learned a tremendous amount about interdisciplinary collaboration, grantsmanship, mentorship, and managing research teams that I am certain will help me in my new faculty position. I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to be part of the program.”

While LeBaron has taken her talents to Virginia, Meghan Underhill, PhD, RN, stayed here. Underhill, who focused during her 2011-13 fellowship on the decisions made by women with BRCA mutations, and later familial risk for pancreatic and prostate cancer, is now a DF/HCC professor training the next generation of nurse-scientists – which delights her mentors-turned-colleagues Sapna Syngal, MD, of Medical Oncology, and Berry.

“Seeing where I am now, after coming through this experience, I realize how appreciative I am to have had the opportunity,” says Underhill.