The Pussycat Foundation expands mentorship program for women scientists

The Pussycat Foundation, created by longtime Cosmopolitan magazine editor-in-chief Helen Gurley Brown, has doubled the size of its signature program at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute with a new grant of $1.9 million. The Helen Gurley Brown Presidential Initiative, which began in 2016 by funding five pairs of senior women faculty and women fellows for two years, has expanded to include 10 pairs for 2018–2020.

The initiative reflects a growing recognition that women with established scientific careers can be uniquely sensitive to the challenges facing their younger female colleagues in academic medicine—and that junior women researchers benefit by having women scientists as mentors and role models. In each pairing, the senior researcher, known as a Helen Mentor, supervises the younger investigator, known as a Helen Fellow, in a research project thought to have particular promise. The mentors and fellows were selected by a review committee comprised of Dana-Farber clinicians and researchers.

“All of cancer research benefits when young women scientists have the opportunity to draw on the experience and example of women leaders of laboratory and clinical research,” said Helen Mentor Laurie H. Glimcher, MD, Dana-Farber president and CEO and the Richard and Susan Smith Professor of Medicine. “We’re thrilled that the foundation has enabled us to double the size of this initiative.”

The Pussycat Foundation, named for Helen Gurley Brown’s favorite term of endearment, was created in 2012 to further Gurley Brown’s support of the educational and professional advancement of young women and girls, among other initiatives. The new grant provides two years of funding for Helen Fellows’ salary, research, and professional development. It also includes the Helen Gurley Brown Leadership Development Program, which organizes semi-annual meetings for Helen Mentors and Fellows to update each other on their work; the Helen Gurley Brown Presidential Summit on Women and Science, an annual lecture focused on the career paths of women in science; and support for Helen Fellows to attend scientific conferences.

“This initiative can play a key role not only in building the ranks of women scientists in hematology and oncology but also in correcting the imbalance between male and female researchers in the higher echelons of academic medicine,” said Leslie Kean, MD, PhD, director of the Pediatric Stem Cell Transplant Center and one of the new Helen Mentors. “More than half of medical students are now women, but as you go up the academic career ladder, the number of women declines steadily—and not for a lack of talent. The Helen Gurley Brown Presidential Initiative recognizes the role that those of us in senior leadership can play in furthering the careers of women scientists.”