

Happenings

PORT – Psychosocial Oncology Research Training: A Newly Funded Strategic Initiative in Health Research

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An innovative Canadian psychosocial oncology research training program led by nurse scientists has just been launched. This program is intended to attract trainees from a variety of health, social, organizational, and technological sciences that share interests related to the oncology population. Its guiding vision is the development of research collaborations at the interface of these disciplines to shape both the future of the science of psychosocial oncology and the context for cancer care delivery to optimally meet the needs of diverse oncology populations.

Given the demographic trends and the significance of cancer as a population health issue, the development of PORT is timely. Cancer remains a leading cause of morbidity and premature death in Canada, resulting in much physical as well as emotional suffering for patients and their families. The National Cancer Institute of Canada (NCIC) estimated there would be 139,900 newly diagnosed cases of cancer in 2003, and currently predicts that 38% of women and 41% of men will develop cancer during their lifetime (National Cancer Institute of Canada [NCIC], 2003). At the same time, the relative survival rate for cancer is improving due to advances in detection and treatment (American Cancer Society, 1997), increasing the numbers of patients living with the sequelae of their disease.

As cancer is primarily a disease of older individuals, the numbers of new cases and deaths continue to rise steadily as the Canadian population ages. Currently, among men, 75% of new cancer cases and 82% of deaths due to cancer occur in those over 60 years of age, and, among women, 63% of new cases and 78% of deaths occur in those 60 years and older (NCIC, 2003). Thus the number of patients with cancer is expected to double within the next 15 years (Bultz & Kapusta, 2002). Cancer disrupts all aspects of daily life including family, work, economic

status, and friendships, threatening immediate and future goals and upsetting physiological, psychological, and social equilibrium (Carver et al., 1994; Cassileth et al., 1986; Fife, 1994, Pompe, Antoni, Visser, & Garssen, 1996). The consequences of failing to identify and effectively manage distress among those facing the threat of cancer include poorer outcomes of cancer therapies or risk management strategies, decreased quality of life, and increased health-care costs (Walker et al., 1999; Zabora, Brintsenhofeszoc, Curbow, Hooker, & Piantadosi, 2001). The potentially devastating impact of the experience of cancer on family stability, economics, and health status may transcend generations.

Based on these trends, the psychosocial needs of patients with or at risk for cancer are predicted to increase in complexity and the demand for cancer-related services is estimated to intensify at a yearly rate of 7 to 10% (Cancer Care Ontario, 2002). Psychosocial oncology, a subspecialty in oncology, seeks to document the social, psychological, emotional, spiritual, quality of life, and functional impacts of cancer across the trajectory from prevention to bereavement (Canadian Association of Psychosocial Oncology, 1999). Interventions in the domain of psychosocial oncology are intended to soften the blow of a cancer diagnosis and treatment for those affected and their relatives as well as mitigate the intergenerational impact of cancer. As the incidence of cancer is on the increase, pressures mount to find innovative, effective, and patient-centred strategies to promote optimal psychosocial adjustment through the spectrum of cancer prevention, screening, diagnosis, treatment, and follow-up.

PORT – Psychosocial Oncology Research Training

PORT is a transdisciplinary graduate research training program whose goal is to prepare a new generation of scientists in the development, implementation, evaluation, and transfer of theoretically based and cutting-edge psychosocial approaches to oncology care. This much-needed initiative offers graduate-level fellowships and awards to prepare young researchers to develop, test, and refine effective and accessible state-of-the-art psychosocial cancer-care interventions that will make a significant difference in the lives of people facing the threat of cancer. PORT is funded primarily by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research – Institute of Cancer Research and the National Cancer Institute of Canada. Additional funds are provided by the CURE Foundation and the Newton Foundation.

Rationale

The Canadian Association of Psychosocial Oncology (1999) identifies the rapidly developing field of psychosocial oncology as an area of spe-

cialization with few formal training opportunities. To fill this gap and respond to society's increasing needs for cancer support, the PORT program was developed to promote state-of-the-art theory generation, testing of interventions, and knowledge transfer in the field of psychosocial oncology. This program is an innovative coast-to-coast partnership among Dalhousie University, McGill University, the University of Manitoba, and the University of British Columbia.

Initially the PORT program will engage the core disciplines of nursing, psychology, and health-care management to increase the capacity for high-impact research in psychosocial oncology. To date, the fields of psychology and nursing have contributed significantly to the advancement of psychosocial oncology as a specialty area in health care. However, psychosocial oncology research traditionally has focused on the identification, measurement, and prevalence of selected clinical variables, with limited testing of theoretically based psychosocial approaches to oncology care or psychosocial oncology health services research. The high prevalence of psychological distress among those living with or at risk for cancer demands not only the development and systematic evaluation of theoretically guided psychosocial interventions in high-risk populations, but knowledge of how to successfully imbed these interventions in health-care organizations. The innovative inclusion of health-care management scientists as key partners in PORT ensures that the knowledge generated is readily transferred to interventions that are accessible to those most in need of support.

Objectives

This training initiative addresses the need to complement nationally and internationally recognized programs in basic biomedical oncology research already in place at the four participating universities with a broader cross-site psychosocial focus. The primary objectives of the program are to:

- build on existing strengths of psychosocial oncology research (nursing, psychology) and health-care management (e.g., health service research) teams at Dalhousie University, McGill University, the University of Manitoba, and the University of British Columbia to create synergetic knowledge
- attract the best doctoral and postdoctoral students from Canada and abroad with an interest in psychosocial oncology from a range of health-related disciplines such as nursing, psychology, medicine, health promotion, epidemiology, health services, oncology nursing, and management, as well as to facilitate student exchanges across the diverse research sites

- deliver high-quality student mentorship, research training in psychosocial oncology, and skills in knowledge synthesis and knowledge transfer
- foster the transfer of new knowledge into effective and accessible health-care practices and health-system design and management that contribute to the well-being of cancer patients and their families
- serve as a widely accessible virtual resource centre for oncology researchers, clinicians, patients/families, health managers/administrators, and policy-makers
- build linkages between health-policy and management experts who will play key roles in developing the health-care system of the future, by ensuring that trainees are exposed to decision-making forums (e.g., consortiums, grants panels).

PORT Scientists

As a first step, PORT has brought together scholars who share a common perspective in theoretically based psychosocial oncology interventions. The fields of education, engineering, epidemiology, journalism, occupational/physiotherapy, nutrition, and social work will be progressively integrated, to maximize opportunities for interdisciplinary exchanges, multi-method research, and the development of innovative health education materials and technologies. As the training program expands in scope, additional collaborators to be recruited include those in diverse fields such as library science, medical geography, and architecture.

PORT's four program leaders, one from each of the participating universities, are all nurse scientists recognized nationally and internationally for their research in psychosocial oncology. As a biopsychosocial science long involved in the research and coordination of patient/family health and health services, nursing is in a key position to spearhead transdisciplinary clinical research and to implement findings to enhance the physical and psychological outcomes of oncology patients and the quality of their health care.

The 22-member team of mentors and co-investigators who are committed to this research training program represent a very strong transdisciplinary faculty of scientists with active programs of psychosocial oncology research; they hold operating grants from a broad range of funding agencies and are affiliated with a range of departments and facilities across the four participating sites.

PORT scientists represent a mix of senior, mid-career, and junior scientists, enhancing the long-term sustainability and renewal of the program. In addition, the program's mentors share an active interest in

developing and evaluating new models of graduate education. Guided by the program's vision and values, this initiative will serve also as an experiment in graduate-student learning, extending research in education concomitantly with the development of the PORT program.

Through its guiding precepts of innovation, mentorship, transdisciplinary collaboration, knowledge transfer, and accessibility, the PORT program offers a unique opportunity to train the next generation of researchers and clinician scientists in a new, broad model that facilitates movement of findings across fundamental research in psychosocial oncology to interventions that significantly impact on cancer patients and their families.

PORT is currently accepting applications from those interested in pursuing doctoral or postdoctoral studies in psychosocial oncology at the four participating universities. Further information is available on the PORT Web site: www.port.mcgill.ca

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