Research mentoring for oncology nurses in clinical settings: For whom, why, and how?

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As nursing mentors in cancer and other types of nursing research, in this commentary we will discuss mentoring of students, oncology nurses, and other health professionals as an extremely rewarding experience for both mentors and mentees.

Research mentors are those who freely share their experiential, evidence-based, and theoretical knowledge in providing extracurricular research training for others. Their work is largely volunteer, indicating an expression of mentors’ community service, commitment to the profession, and passion for supporting contributions to nursing research. Mentors invest this time without knowing whether they will reap any rewards. Sometimes mentoring may yield returns immediately, sometimes in a couple of years, and sometimes research projects never materialize. Even though both mentors and mentees face this risk, mentors believe it is their responsibility, as educators, to help others who may not have been as fortunate as they to work in environments that support nursing research.

Characteristics of prospective research mentees that mentors often look for include being a realistic individual who is motivated, self-determined, a flexible thinker, open-minded, inquisitive, intellectually humble, and an individual who is able to endure uncertainty. For the most part, mentors are excited when individuals with these characteristics present themselves.

How to find a research mentor. Potential mentors can be found by looking at a list of nurse researchers within your work setting and professional organizations, on Sosido, by approaching researchers at scientific meetings, or consulting the faculty directories of university and college programs. You can look in Google Scholar or PubMed to see what oncology nurses in Canada are publishing on topics of interest to you. You can also ask past mentees who their research mentors were. Identify who you think would be a potential mentor for you.

The next step is to contact the person you selected, share with this prospective mentor your plans for research, and request a professional collaboration. Over the years, many undergraduate and graduate nurses have taken part in our programs of research solely by asking us how they could engage in research.

opportunities for research-mentoring oncology nurses

Mentoring opportunities come in many forms. A few that we have encountered as nursing professors and researchers are:

1. Professionals from the community approaching us or other nursing professors for guidance on how to develop a research protocol and conduct a study.
2. In our university teaching, students volunteer to work on specific research-project tasks, such as conducting literature searches for a given project, developing an online format of paper questionnaires, and entering data from questionnaires onto statistical spreadsheets.
3. Mentees may also bring project ideas that interest them and see if these new ideas can be integrated into mentors’ research programs.

Successful mentoring relationships are mutually respectful. There is an exchange of the mentor’s guidance for the mentee’s commitment to actively engage in “real” work. In return for this commitment, mentors can offer mentees research opportunities such as attending meetings (in person or online), assisting in report writing, preparing ethics review protocols, drafting presentation abstracts, and networking with others. Some mentees have had specific goals such as gaining research and communication skills to present at nursing conferences, while others have wanted to strengthen their CVs for graduate school applications (Zanchetta, Maheu, Baku, Nemhbad-Wedderburn & Lemonde, 2015).

benefits of research mentoring for oncology nurses as mentees and mentors

Research provides constant intellectual stimulation, which develops unanticipated personal skills. A unique benefit of collaborating with a research mentor is having opportunities to “try on” intellectual partnerships with potential graduate supervisors. For professionals, having a research mentor allows them to bring their curiosity and new skills into their daily practices through engaging in further research projects (e.g., evaluation of programs at their clinical site). For graduate students (both current and aspiring), co-authoring scientific abstracts and peer-reviewed articles and/or getting a promotion are undoubtedly the top benefits of being mentored.

Mentoring relationships are also an excellent way for mentors to find valuable research assistants, study coordinators, and future graduate students! Longer-term benefits for mentors include having knowledge production from their research programs in all forms (abstracts, research projects, manuscripts, knowledge translation tools, etc.) move forward more quickly. Successful mentoring relationships may benefit schools of nursing or faculties by attracting strong potential graduate students.
DOES RESEARCH MENTORING REALLY WORK?

As research mentors, we have coached multiple mentees who successfully presented at local, provincial, national, and international scientific meetings. We have also coached many mentees as co-authors on our publications, despite their lack of research experience when the mentoring relationships began. We have published more than 29 publications, including a book chapter, about intellectual partnerships to educate community services students. Some examples are published in Bailey, Zanchetta, Pon, Velasco, Wilson-Mitchell and Hassan, 2015; Zanchetta, Maheu, Baku, Nembhard-Wedderburn and Lemonde, 2015; Zanchetta, Maheu, Galhego-Garcia, Baku, Guruge and Secord, 2013; and Zanchetta, Monteiro, Gorospe, Pilon and Peña, 2010. Many of our publications with mentees corroborate our argument that research mentoring is feasible and successful when both mentees and mentors embrace the common goal of intellectual partnership.

Although not all mentoring experiences result in publications or presentations, our mentees have finnished their experience with a new appreciation for nursing research that positively influences their practice. That is, mentees become more critical in evaluating their practice and seek research evidence to support patient care or making changes to their practice.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

We hope that we have stimulated readers who want to learn about choosing mentors to mobilize their intellectual potential and facilitate research, as both knowledge producers and knowledge users. We also hope that we have sparked an interest in other nursing scholars to consider mentoring as a rewarding experience.

For oncology nurses ready to venture into uncharted territories, reaching out to a past professor may be all it takes to find a path to inquisitive learning and research. Providing research mentoring experiences, while for the most part informal and unpaid, is a collective responsibility we should all embrace and support. Mentoring experiences have tremendous potential to impact on mentors, mentees, and our nursing profession.

REFERENCES


