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Radiologist and mentor Barbara Raphael (left) with medical student Chioma Enweasor

Summary

Our summer fellowship program helps medical students learn to become physician-scientists. Read about one of our trainees who investigated an imaging tool for use in patients with a rare uterine cancer.

The academic rigors of medical school are well known. Students face early mornings of back-to-back lectures on topics such as microbiology and

histopathology, long afternoons in the laboratory, and nights spent poring over textbooks.

“In your first year of medical school, you are completely focused on coursework,” reflects Chioma Enweasor, a student at Weill Cornell Medical College who begins her second year of medical school in September. “But there are experiences you can have that are just as valuable to your career goals as doing well in your coursework.”

The experience to which Ms. Enweasor refers is Memorial Sloan Kettering’s eight-week Medical Student Summer Fellowship Program and the mentoring she has received from her faculty sponsor, radiologist Barbara Raphael.

Evaluating FDG PET/CT for Patients with Recurrent Uterine Leiomyosarcoma

The Medical Student Summer Fellowship Program, which began more than three decades ago, gives first- and second-year medical students the chance to conduct clinical or laboratory research in the area of their choice. As one of the 61 student selected for the fellowship in 2013, Ms. Enweasor chose a project investigating the role of fluorine-18 fluorodeoxyglucose PET combined with CT (a type of imaging, also known as FDG PET/CT, which is used to identify cancer in the body) in caring for patients with recurrent uterine leiomyosarcoma, a rare and aggressive tumor of the uterus.

“CT imaging is the current standard in assessing recurrence or disease progression for such patients, and it relies on the anatomy only,” Dr. Raphael explains. “FDG PET/CT imaging, however, allows you to see tumor viability and metabolism – and uterine tumors tend to be highly metabolically active.”

Ms. Enweasor’s role on the project, which is the largest retrospective study of its kind, has been to review medical records and help identify patients who might be more accurately assessed through the use of FDG PET/CT imaging. She presented the preliminary data for the project on August 15, at a special poster session for fellowship students.

“We hypothesize that FDG PET/CT might have a higher sensitivity to detect recurrent disease compared to CT and could become a better tool for post-therapy surveillance of patients at risk for recurrence of high-grade uterine sarcomas,” Ms. Enweasor says.

Other physicians participating in the ongoing study include medical oncologist Martee L. Hensley, Molecular Imaging and Therapy Service Chief Wolfgang Weber; and Body Imaging Service Chief Evis Sala.

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Learning to Become a Physician-Scientist

To supplement the research component of the fellowship, students attend weekly talks featuring leading physician-scientists at Memorial Sloan Kettering including, this past summer, Deputy Physician-in-Chief for Breast Cancer Programs Larry Norton and Memorial Sloan Kettering President Craig B. Thompson.

“These lectures gave me an overview of what cancer research looks like now, and got me excited about where it’s going in the future,” Ms. Enweasor says.

Other speakers address matters of everyday importance, such as how to follow institutional guidelines for involving patients in clinical studies, while special training sessions expose the students to the basics of pulling data from the medical record system for retrospective analysis.

“They are learning how to set up a research study from start to finish as well as how to be responsible physician-scientists,” observes Dr. Raphael, who was herself a trainee at Memorial Sloan Kettering before joining the faculty in July 2012.

“I have been given amazing opportunities at Memorial Sloan Kettering,” Dr. Raphael says of her training experience. “The Department of Radiology and our department chair, Hedvig Hricak, are committed to mentorship activities in general and to advancing the careers of women in medicine specifically.”

“I love being a mentor,” she adds. “It is great for me to be able to give back to these students, especially when I am working with someone as bright as Chioma.”

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“What Academic Medicine Looks Like”

Many of the students also have the opportunity to sit in on disease management team (DMT) meetings. DMT meetings bring together specialists in surgery, oncology, genetics, pathology, radiation therapy, and imaging, along with other experts who help to ensure that patients' nonmedical needs are being met. Teams meet weekly to review cases and develop individualized treatment plans for specific patients.

During her fellowship, Ms. Enweasor accompanied Dr. Raphael to meetings of the Gynecologic Cancer Disease Management Team, an experience she describes as "illuminating."

"I really like the idea of doctors getting together regularly to discuss tough cases," Ms. Enweasor elaborates. "These are cases that may be difficult individually but that can be managed well when a group of doctors shares their knowledge."

"I absolutely agree!" Dr. Raphael chimes in. "DMTs are a unique feature of patient management at Memorial Sloan Kettering. They provide our trainees with an unparalleled learning environment, and they also drive our high quality of care and the superior outcomes we are able to achieve for our patients."

Ms. Enweasor points to yet another benefit of attending the meetings. "DMTs have been great for my clinical knowledge because they've given me a chance to hear first-hand how doctors actually communicate with each other. They've really helped me to understand what academic medicine looks like. Before I came here, I didn't know how much I needed that."

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Ms. Enweasor's participation in the Medical Student Summer Fellowship Program was supported through Memorial Sloan Kettering's Office of Diversity Programs in Clinical Care, Research, and Training, which is committed to increasing the number of minority researchers and professionals in oncology.

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