

Duke Fellows

Attracting the Best and Brightest

Holding a child's hand. Testing life-saving drugs. Investigating chromosomes to find the bad guy. Doing whatever it takes to obliterate devastating diseases.

Those are on the short list of what training fellows are doing in Duke's three-year Pediatric Hematology-Oncology Fellowship Training Program. The learning curve is steep and the work important, so Duke looks for the best and brightest applicants.

"I expect the people who will succeed in this field are those who have a thirst for knowledge," says program director Dr. Susan Kreissman, also a professor in the department of pediatrics' Division of Hematology-Oncology at Duke University School of Medicine. "They want to learn, and they have the capacity to know where to go to get information and then can apply that information to patient care."

Although training fellows are seen as novices in the program, they've already graduated medical school and completed a three-year pediatric residency. But, instead of heading to private practice, they've decided to specialize, Kreissman says, and commit to being in training for at least three more years.

Training fellows are matched with families undergoing treatment and become the child's primary care physician. "They're the ones that spend time talking to the family, holding hands, and being the go-between, to support them through what is an incredibly difficult period," Kreissman says.

The fellows work closely with trained oncology specialists on the care of each patient. "The fellow may not know all the answers to the very specific questions about how to change a dose of chemotherapy, but that's what they're here to learn," Kreissman says.

The pediatric hematology-oncology physicians serve as mentors for the fellows, teaching and guiding them, as well as delegating responsibilities. Kreissman went through a similar training program nearly 30 years ago. "If you're in charge of something, you're much more likely to learn it than if you're just doing what somebody else tells you to do," she says.

The program's first year is a clinical year, in which fellows work directly with the patients. The last two years are largely dedicated to research.

"We've had our fellows working to look at new ways to use cord blood stem cells that may help treat not just bone marrow diseases, but other diseases," Kreissman says. "Our fellows are doing research in the laboratory trying to either understand how AML (acute myeloid leukemia) develops or how to switch off a gene that causes rhabdomyosarcoma." Another fellow had



SUSAN G. KREISSMAN, MD

the opportunity to identify a new drug for hard-to-treat brain tumors, she says.

As program director, part of Kreissman's job is to keep the coffers filled with stellar candidates so advances in pediatric hematology-oncology at Duke continue.

"I think one of the reasons people go into pediatric hematology-oncology is because of the intensity of the relationships that they form with the parents and the patients," she says. "When a child is critically ill and in a life-threatening situation, those bonds are important. As a young physician, it's a really powerful experience to have the ability to care for someone at that level."

It can be hard, too. That's one of the reasons the three-year period is split between patient care and research. "We're trying to improve our training so that our fellows are not only well trained, but that they're happy and well-balanced, to attract new people who are medical students or residents who are working with our fellows," Kreissman says.

That includes having research options that fellows can be excited about. Kreissman says that when she was in training, fellows were expected to do research in a basic science laboratory, but that now there is an opportunity for many different kinds of research.

Opportunities include researching initiatives on psychological/social supportive care, or how physicians deliver care and explain test results. Global health research is another emerging research field, as is research to improve the standard of care across pediatric institutions.

"When you have a good mentor and a project that the fellow is interested in, great things happen," Kreissman says. "It's important we continue to have a source of people who are motivated and dedicated to something that's extremely difficult, but also extremely rewarding." ●

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