



How Did I Get Here? And Where Am I Going? Part 1

Before we get started, allow me to set the “stage.” My name is Mikaela, I am a recent DPT graduate with a passion for oncology and also just accepted a spot in a neurologic residency program. At this point you might be thinking... “hold on, I want to know how to project myself toward oncology not neuro” however, don’t close the page yet, I think you’ll like what I have to say. I have learned some important lessons in my journey as a student in the oncology rehabilitation field. I wanted to share my experiences with other students who are thinking of taking a similar path.

I went into PT school knowing I was interested in oncology. However, once I arrived, I quickly learned I was one of few and the clinical spots for oncology were even fewer. Luckily, I was able to find a teacher who mentored me along my journey. The first order of business I decided was to solidify my passion for oncology... only clinical sites didn’t want first or second years and even if they did, there was none offered. I knew I couldn’t wait till my third clinical rotation to jump into “figuring out” if oncology was my thing. So instead, I started asking.

Lesson 1: SHADOWING can be a great opportunity to gain experience in oncology rehabilitation, especially if you are not able to go on a full clinical rotation. Shadowing in oncology rehabilitation during my extra time was extremely helpful in solidifying where I wanted to steer my patient care path. Through asking my mentor and other professors, I was able to get in touch with a physical therapist at a local hospital and shadow her for a couple hours in the morning before class on the oncology wing.

After just a few days of shadowing, I confirmed my passion for oncology rehabilitation, got a much needed reboot from all the didactic work, and realized I needed to get involved more in this field. To start the ball rolling I began volunteering for a regional oncology society’s annual meetings (NNECOS for those of you in New England). This opened my eyes to a whole new world of oncology, helped me get familiar with different treatments, different cancer types and allowed me to network with a variety of health care providers, once I finally worked up the courage to talk.

Lesson 2: DO NOT let intimidation keep you from talking and networking. Networking allowed me to visit different oncologic treatment areas on my last clinical rotation and helped me team up with other PT’s to complete oncology specific projects and brought me to this group!

Projects specific to oncologic physical therapy was another undertaking that helped shape my path. I decided to add on an elective that a teacher/ oncology guru, Dr. Amy Litterini, agreed to teach and help facilitate the completion of these projects. These elective projects combined with Dr. Litterini’s mentorship helped me expand my knowledge in the oncologic field, including gaining knowledge in topics such as lymphedema and pelvic health. They also allowed me to interact with other medical professionals who shared an equal passion for oncologic care.



During school, I think there are a lot of times when a student questions themselves. Whether it's a bad grade and they question their knowledge, financial issues and they question furthering their education, or if you're me, constantly questioning if I truly loved oncology. At the point where I was completing my projects, it had been over a year since I had shadowed in oncology, I was feeling frustrated with all the extra didactic work I had taken on and was not sure that the path I had now thrown myself into was still my path. This is where I leave you with the final lesson.

Lesson 3: VOLUNTEER. It wasn't till my last didactic semester that I decided to volunteer for a hospice organization, and it made all the difference. Although I was not actively treating my patients I went to see, I was able to get human interaction with someone going through a process of grieving and remembrance. Although sad, I knew that this was something I was meant to be a part of in a person's life. This was the number one thing that set me up for success when I entered my last clinical at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center.

Be on the lookout for another blog article featuring more of my advice for students interested in oncology rehabilitation. I will speak about MD Anderson in my second segment and why volunteering helped so much in my role as a student clinician. I will also speak to why I chose a neurologic residency and how I plan to keep up with all things oncology. Stay tuned for more, and never stop looking for opportunities!

-Mikaela McGuire PT, DPT