



Maintaining Persistence Through Adversity

By: Shai Sewell PT, DPT

First off I'd like to introduce myself. My name is Shai Sewell, and I graduated from the University of Miami DPT program in 2018. I am a physical therapist who currently works in the acute setting at the University of Florida Shands Cancer Hospital, in the Bone Marrow Transplant and Hematological Oncology units. I have a great passion for, well you guessed it, Oncology Rehab! I am also the Chair of Social Media for the Academy and am involved with mentorship for the academy and the Student and New Professional Special Interest Group. How'd I get here? Let's begin...

Chapter 1: The Early Years

My interest in pursuing my doctorate all started when a younger me experienced a sports related injury. I noticed how much fun my physical therapists had at work and working with me. And I had fun working with them. Since that injury in the 6th grade, the idea of being in a career where I got to work with people to improve their quality of life and get them back to their prior level of function intrigued me.

As I was applying to PT school, I had the opportunity to volunteer in the ICU at the University of California, San Francisco with Heidi Engel, who does amazing work promoting early mobility and fighting as a patient advocate (look her up @HeidiEngel4 on twitter, you won't be disappointed!). After my designated volunteer hours were up, I asked her if I could keep coming to shadow and she was beyond accepting of my interest (ask with no expectations, and you will never be disappointed, you will only learn!). She allowed me to handle IV poles, organize lines, and I even assisted her while she worked with patients who were on ECMO. These experiences gave me clear insight on why I wanted to become a physical therapist, and since then I have always had a passion for inpatient PT. But I gained more than just interest for this setting. Heidi taught me compassion, interprofessional collaboration, honesty, fighting for what you believe in as a therapist, and most of all she taught me that our ability as therapists to give inner strength to those who have experienced severe functional, and often cognitive dysfunction is one of our greatest assets.



Chapter 2: The Golden Years (of PT School)

About two years before getting accepted into PT school, my mother was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer. While I continued to pursue my dream, she remained very active, and even at times halted treatment in order to travel to see her family in Israel. This time I spent with her and seeing the decisions she made while going through multiple different therapies, really left an imprint, not only on my personal life, but on my professional life. The experiences that she went through, and difficult decisions she made in order to remain independent and feeling fulfilled while living, encouraged me to provide the same sense of independence to my patients.

Ever since my mother's diagnosis, I had a keen interest in how we as physical therapists could contribute to those diagnosed with cancer. I noticed her incredible ability to remain active, and care about her quality of life more than anything else. From her perspective, what was living if you could not enjoy the things you love? Experiences like seeing your family and friends, going on a walk with the dog, being able to go on hikes or kayaking, or even traveling halfway across the world to go home. Her experiences would shape my views on how I approach speaking with my patients and planning not only my goals for them, but their individual goals.

In my last year of PT school in 2018, I attended the Combined Sections Meeting where at the Academy of Oncologic Physical Therapy booth I ran into Steve Wechsler, who at the time was heading the social media accounts. We had sparked good conversation (well I thought so), and I had expressed my eagerness to get involved with the Academy but verbalized my frustration that I had not quite found a way to do so. A few months following CSM, Steve asked if I wanted to take the lead on the social media accounts for the Academy. I was delighted to find a place where I could contribute to the Academy. From there the doors opened to all sorts of opportunities. I was in meetings discussing issues that mattered to me, communicating and sharing thoughts with such people as Chris Wilson, Cindy Pfalzer, Nicole Stout, and so many giants on the field. I also got to connect with other students and younger professionals whose passion matched mine. When I look back at what got me here, I realize that this all started with one conversation, built around the honesty of feeling lost, wanting to do more, and exhibiting my passion for oncology rehab.



Chapter 3: And Here I Am

After graduating from PT school, I began my career at the University of Miami, Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center working in the acute Bone Marrow Transplant Unit (want to learn more about BMT? See my previous post!). Although originally interested in lymphedema, this was a great opportunity for me to do both acute rehab, and cancer rehab, two of my passions. Not only that, I got a job in oncology rehab out of school! How cool is that? But some good things come to an end, and it was time for me to leave Miami. So, from there I moved to the University of Florida, Shands Cancer Center in Gainesville, Florida, where I currently work on the Hematological Oncology and Bone Marrow Transplant units (did I already put in a plug? Check out my last post to learn more about BMT!). Working with bone marrow transplant patients has become a passion of mine where I find the continuum of care, and more specifically quality care, lacking greatly across the country.

I believe that where I got to today didn't come without some sacrifice, some adversity, and fear as a student and new clinician. Everyone will have their own path they take, and their own trials, errors, and successes. In (almost) closing remarks, I do hope that the lessons I have learned can bring hope, and maybe some inspiration to those pursuing oncology rehab.

As a student, and now new clinician, I have already learned a lot via my journey, and I hope to pass on some of my knowledge via my personal experiences (in no specific order):

- 1) Don't overthink your questions, especially ones that display interest in a topic. Those in medicine applaud curiosity, and you will be rewarded.
- 2) Cancer rehab is everywhere. Cancer affects a very large percent of the population, and even more if you include cancer survivors. Just because the clinic you're in doesn't say "Cancer Rehabilitation" on the front door, does not mean there aren't good opportunities. Ask, and explore opportunities. You will be amazed at what you find.



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- 3) Rejection is only the world telling you there are better opportunities out there. If something doesn't work out, be patient, keep searching, and keep working hard! It's there!
 - 4) Spark up conversation. Whether it pertains to Oncology Rehab or not, someone, if not most people are interested in learning about your journey just as much as you are interested in theirs.
 - 5) You're never an expert. Always stay humble and know that there is always more to learn.

Thank you for taking the time to read this piece, and as I will always end, please feel free to reach out if you have any further questions about cancer rehab, or my journey.

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