



Stepping into the Driver's Seat: Creating an Oncology Student Special Interest Group (SIG)

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Perspective: one of the greatest lessons taught in physical therapy schooling. A professor of mine once said, as physical therapists, we are instructed not to look too closely at the trees, but rather to take a step back and examine the forest. This is a challenging lesson for a class of 79 detail-oriented students and a statement that took me experience, anxiety and initiative to grasp.

As an individual who has spent the past eight years planning for this exact career path, completing my first year of physical therapy school with zero insight into which setting I wished to practice was extremely daunting. The personal dilemma I faced was not of indifference, but rather regarding a passion for multiple specialties and the cohesion of each of these systems. It wasn't until speaking with an oncologic physical therapist that I recognized the cumulative impacts cancer treatment has on the human body. Unfortunately, cancer does not just cut down one tree in the forest. It is comprehensive, collective and multifaceted. It is the interaction of nervous, cardiovascular, lymphatic and orthopedic systems, and it gave me a view of the forest.

Finding the setting of oncologic physical therapy was extremely exciting for me; however, as it is the newest accredited board certification within the APTA, there is much less emphasis on it within my DPT curriculum. At Duke Doctor of Physical Therapy, student-led extracurriculars exist in the form of Special Interest Groups (SIGs) which are modeled after the Academies and Sections of the APTA. Examples include Pelvic Health, Sports, Acute Care, and Private Practice SIGs. The purpose of the SIGs is to allow students the opportunity to learn from clinicians working directly in that specialty, gain resources and mentors within a niche physical therapy setting, and explore the variety of applications our profession has to offer. About once a month, each student-led SIG hosts a meeting, typically joined by a local clinician involved in that setting.

It is the responsibility of a DPT program to teach you the foundational knowledge and skills required to become an entry-level clinician, but it is our responsibility as students to create opportunities that support and expand on this infrastructure. Recognizing a need for education on oncologic physical therapy within my DPT program was of primary importance. This exploration led me to my professor's offices, where I



picked their brains about oncologic rehabilitation, and ultimately inspired me to share this passion with peers through the creation of an Oncology SIG.

Establishing a student-led extracurricular may appear intimidating. I felt like I needed to be an expert to spearhead this group, but the beauty of student-led clubs is that the leaders are learners too. To my student peers reading this post, creating an Oncology SIG or club within your program is a rewarding and attainable way to grow your own education beyond the foundation of coursework and clinical experiences. Through this blog post, it is my hope to provide the guidance needed for others to follow in creating their own oncologic physical therapy student interest groups.

There are several steps I took to create an Oncology SIG, which I would like to share with anyone interested in starting one at their school. I first began this endeavor by communicating with faculty within my program to find a professor with a background or interest in oncologic physical therapy. After finding this professor, it is important to recruit him or her for professional mentorship within your club. The second, and most important, initiative to make is reaching out to alumni and local physical therapists working with oncology patients. It may just take one connection that then snowballs into many others. Due to the expanded use of virtual platforms throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, it is feasible to communicate with distant clinicians as well. If your program has an alumni relation's chair, that individual will be an important resource to connect with. In addition, my co-leader and I researched clinicians within the Duke Health network to personally email. Creating your own network of clinicians is essential to the content creation of your SIG. Through speaking with professionals about their experiences within oncologic physical therapy, new meeting topics will arise, and the roots of your SIG will strengthen.

Once you have established your own foundational knowledge through speaking with professionals, it is time to grow your audience. My co-leader, Grace Ditzenberger, and I spent time brainstorming the purpose and objectives of our SIG. Through this planning, it became easier to create a roadmap of future meetings and events. With our primary purpose being to expand students' knowledge of the oncologic physical therapy setting, it was important to lead an introductory meeting outlining general applications of physical therapy within the oncology treatment timeline. We were joined by oncologic board-certified physical therapist, Dr. Zachary Tally, who provided anecdotal insight from his practice. Specific topics of discussion in this meeting included cancer related fatigue, chemotherapy induced peripheral neuropathy, scar tissue and



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lymphedema management, range of motion requirements for radiation and differences between inpatient and outpatient settings. As in all marketing, sparking an audience's interest is the groundwork for the creation of a consistent following.

After this first introductory meeting, it is up to you as the SIG leader to take the club in whatever direction you wish. For us, we hoped to dive deeper into the five sub-specialties within the APTA Oncology Section: Oncologic Balance and Falls, Lymphatic Diseases, Pediatric Oncology, HIV Disease, and Hospice and Palliative Care. Future meetings have and will continue to be joined by specialists treating patients within each of these categories. In addition to those topics pre-defined by the Academy, Grace and I have used our Oncology SIG as a platform for advocacy. We would not be examining cancer treatment holistically if we did not consider the psychosocial components and health disparities that accompany it. Each SIG within the Duke DPT program uses their meetings and networks for different purposes, and as a student leader, you too can experience this independence of opportunity.

The path I took to finding oncologic physical therapy and establishing a student interest group is just one road along the convoluted route I am on, in finding my place as a future physical therapist. It may or may not be a road you travel on, as you too discover your destination within our profession. Doctor of Physical Therapy curriculums provide well-tested navigation to our final destinations, but you are the driver. As students, we have the fantastic freedom to steer along unpaved roads and establish new grounds. You too can grab the wheel and champion your own Oncology SIG. Your education is ahead, your eyes are on the road, but now the question begs, where will you go next?