

Summer Student Research Program

Project Description

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PROJECT TITLE (200 Characters max): *The Hope Library: Storytelling as Psychosocial Support for Cancer Patients.*

HYPOTHESIS:

We hypothesize that through storytelling, patients will experience improvement in self-reported anxiety, reductions in feelings of isolation, and establish a new sense of identity and control over their cancer journey.

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Purpose:

This project aims to evaluate the effectiveness of a video library featuring personal stories from patients, caregivers, and providers at University Hospital's Cancer Institute of New Jersey. The Hope Library serves as a resource for individuals to share experiences related to cancer diagnosis, treatment, and recovery, addressing the growing need for emotional support and cancer education. This study will assess the library's impact on patient and caregiver well-being, as well as its role in enhancing medical student education.

Design:

The Hope Library is being constructed from recorded oral histories of patients who have undergone cancer treatment, as well as their caregivers and healthcare providers. These stories are collected through guided conversations, where participants have the opportunity to share their experiences in a reflective and supportive setting. Students play an active role in this process, helping to facilitate discussions and ensuring that each storyteller's perspective is captured in a way that is both meaningful and authentic. At the end of each storytelling session, students will administer a survey to the storyteller.

Once recorded and edited, these stories will be stored in a digital archive and made accessible on tablets within the cancer center. During clinic and infusion check in, students will explain the purpose of the project and offer patients a tablet to view the library. At the end of each video, viewers will have the option to complete a satisfaction questionnaire and provide feedback.

Data Collection: Surveys will be administered at the Cancer Center at University Hospital in private spaces. Storytellers will complete the Hope Library surveys. Students who aid in the recording of the videos will be asked to complete surveys regarding their opinions on storytelling, comfort engaging in difficult conversations, desire to empower patients with psychosocial support, and their experiences talking with patients. All library viewers will be given an opportunity to indicate their satisfaction with the library and provide feedback. Surveys are expected to take no more than five minutes. The length of time for the viewing of the video will depend on the video length.

Data Analysis: Data analysis will be quantitative and qualitative. We will tabulate the number of patients, caregivers, and providers that participated in the project and their answers to the Likert scale surveys. Their comments will be analyzed qualitatively.

SPONSOR'S MOST RECENT PUBLICATIONS RELEVANT TO THIS RESEARCH:

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Korst MR, Hornyak JN, Blanchard IN, et al. Thematic analysis of personal narratives of patients with cancer treated in a safety net hospital: a pilot study. Submitted for publication. *Psycho-Oncology*. 2025. Manuscript number PON-25-0179.

Blanchard IN, Korst MR, Hornyak JN, et al. Role of the healthcare team in psychosocial support for oncology patients: a thematic analysis of patient and survivor interviews. Presented at: American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) Annual Meeting; June 2025; Chicago, IL. Poster Presentation.

IS THIS PROJECT SUPPORTED BY EXTRAMURAL FUNDS?

Yes - NJ Health Foundation grant # PC13-24.

THIS PROJECT IS: ☒ Clinical ☐ Laboratory ☐ Behavioral ☐ Other

THIS PROJECT IS CANCER-RELATED ☒

The need for greater support among patients with cancer is well-documented, particularly among minorities and low-income individuals who face higher levels of distress. University Hospital (UH) in Newark, NJ, which serves the largest number of charity care cases in the state, reflects these disparities. The surrounding community experiences a poverty rate twice the national average (27.4% vs. 13.8%), an uninsured rate of 19.1%, and the highest number of individuals experiencing homelessness in New Jersey. Chronic illness disproportionately affects this population, and cancer, in particular, is a significant source of psychological distress.

University Hospital's 2022 Community Health Needs Assessment, which gathered input from over 1,100 Newark residents, stakeholders, and leaders, identified a critical need for better support in navigating healthcare and social services. Many individuals described fears about opening up to providers and feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and stigma following a diagnosis.

The link between emotional distress and poorer cancer outcomes is well established. In 1997, the National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) proposed distress as the sixth vital sign in cancer care, yet rates of distress among patients remain as high as 35-70%. Storytelling has emerged as a powerful tool to help patients cope, with participants reporting increased hope and reduced anxiety. By sharing their experiences, individuals can shift their illness narrative from an isolating personal burden to a shared, collective experience—one that fosters learning, connection, and support.

Recognizing the urgent need for enhanced psychosocial support at the Cancer Institute of New Jersey at University Hospital, we developed The Hope Library, a video archive of oral histories from cancer survivors, caregivers, and providers. This library will be available to patients at all stages of their cancer journey, offering a source of shared experience and emotional support. Surveys will assess its effectiveness in addressing the psychosocial needs of patients in a community with limited access to such resources.

THIS PROJECT INVOLVES THE USE OF HUMAN SUBJECTS ☒

APPROVED ☒ IRB PROTOCOL # 2024000541

THIS PROJECT IS SUITABLE FOR: ENTERING FRESHMAN ☒
SOPHOMORES

THIS PROJECT IS WORK-STUDY: No ☐

THIS PROJECT WILL BE POSTED DURING ACADEMIC YEAR FOR VOLUNTEERS?: Yes

WHAT WILL THE STUDENT LEARN FROM THIS EXPERIENCE?

Participating in The Hope Library offers NJMS students a unique opportunity to explore the power of narrative in medicine. While preclinical training emphasizes efficient patient interviews—focusing on extracting relevant details and streamlining information—students rarely receive formal guidance on how

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to truly listen with rather than to a patient. Through conducting interviews, students become active participants in each patient's story, strengthening their ability to practice patient-centered care.

This experience fosters key skills, including compassionate listening, engaging in difficult conversations, and understanding the burdens of chronic illness. Students will learn to listen attentively, interpret and reflect on what they hear, and respond with greater emotional awareness. They will gain a deeper appreciation for social determinants of health and develop confidence in navigating conversations that help patients make sense of disruptive experiences.

Beyond clinical skills, The Hope Library also offers students exposure to research on the intersection of storytelling and medicine. By contributing to a growing archive of patient experiences, students engage with qualitative research methods and explore the role of narrative in shaping health outcomes. This experience encourages critical thinking about how personal stories can inform broader discussions on healthcare disparities, patient autonomy, and medical decision-making.

The Hope Library serves as early exposure to the personal dimensions of cancer care, offering insight into how a patient's story extends beyond their diagnosis. Previous students have described a newfound appreciation for narrative medicine, recognizing how storytelling grants patients autonomy in shaping their own experiences. Ultimately, The Hope Library reinforces the idea that patients are more than their pathologies, preparing students to provide humanistic, empathetic care.