Mary Ann Cantrell, PhD, ’89 MSN dedicates her teaching and research to childhood cancer survivors

In 1984, Mary Ann Cantrell was a registered nurse practicing on the adolescent unit at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia when her patient, a high school football player, awoke as she administered his 4 a.m. chemotherapy treatment. Steve, who was battling stomach cancer, turned to her and said, “Mary Ann, I’m glad it’s you doing my chemo. I feel so safe with you.”

“About the time I finished,” Dr. Cantrell says, “there was this explosion of research on childhood cancer survivors.” She turned her attention to investigating this population.

In the three decades since, Dr. Cantrell has practiced as a nurse for 18 years, published widely and prepared hundreds of nurses for careers. Inducted as a fellow of the American Academy of Nursing in 2015, she is credited with contributing to the evidence base in psychosocial care interventions for pediatric cancer patients.

“Dr. Cantrell started to follow some patients after they left treatment and entered the world of survivorship. Her research illuminated the struggles of childhood cancer patients, at least two-thirds of whom live with long-term effects. Physical issues can include radiation damage, problems with fertility and digestion troubles.

While survivors have reported some positive psychosocial impacts, they also face intimacy difficulties, financial concerns, discrimination, depression and a sense of isolation. As one survivor said to Dr. Cantrell, “I’m healed, but I’m not whole.”

Dr. Cantrell has pulled back the curtain on what happens after children have defeated cancer, says Teresa Conte, CRNP, ’04 MSN, ’11 PhD, an assistant professor of Nursing at the University of Scranton. When Dr. Conte was earning her doctorate at Villanova, the two collaborated on a study of young adults who were no longer in treatment for cancer but who hadn’t hit the five-year mark when they could be officially considered “survivors.”

“These kids have told us, ‘When I go back to the oncology clinic, I don’t want to sit with the kids in treatment, yet I’m not allowed to sit on the survivorship side. So where am I?’” Dr. Conte says. “Mary Ann’s research has brought attention to that.”

Currently, Dr. Cantrell has funding for two projects focused on adult female childhood cancer survivors, a subgroup that has been shown to experience higher levels of psychosocial distress and depression. In one, she is examining the health outcomes of survivors between the ages of 22 and 39 to provide more evidence for the development and testing of targeted interventions.

The other project, funded by the Oncology Nursing Society, is a feasibility study to assess the acceptability of the use of a mobile health app among this subgroup. Dr. Cantrell’s interest in mobile health apps was piqued by Susan Birkhoff, RN, ’10 MSN, ’17 PhD, an assistant professor of Nursing at the University of Scranton. When Dr. Birkhoff mentioned in class that she had been a CHOP nurse, Luff’s ears perked up. After class, Luff approached Dr. Cantrell, who remembered her. “That was a really cool moment for me to be able thank her in person,” Luff says.

Luff took several courses with Dr. Cantrell and participated in her research. When Luff was ready to enter the workforce, Dr. Cantrell put her in touch with a CHOP colleague, an introduction that led to Luff’s position as a nurse in outpatient oncology.

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“I was this itty-bitty thing. How could I protect him?” recalls Dr. Cantrell, now a professor in the College of Nursing at Villanova, where she earned her Master of Science in Nursing in 1989. “But it was more about emotional protection than anything else.”

Inspired by her connection with Steve and other pediatric cancer patients, Dr. Cantrell, who had earned her Bachelor of Science in Nursing from Duquesne University, went on to write her doctoral dissertation at the University of Maryland on the relationship between self-esteem and hope among adolescents with cancer. “About the time I finished,” Dr. Cantrell says, “there was this explosion of research on childhood cancer survivors.”

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