UPMC
LIFE CHANGING MEDICINE

Palliative Research CENTER PaRC

February 2024

# Palliative Care News

## Message from Jane and Yael

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We are thrilled to share with you the amazing work taking place throughout the Section and the Palliative Research Center (PaRC). We invite you to learn more in our Program Highlights, which showcase our incredible interdisciplinary team members, Maria Lowry, PharmD, and Donna Durant, senior CRNP. We also celebrate two faculty members — Amar Bansal, MD, who received the UPMC Early Mid-Career Physician Excellence in Clinical Care Award, and Gina Piscitello, MD, who has transitioned from research fellow to assistant professor. We're eager to explore fresh opportunities to propel forward the mission of palliative care at UPMC and the University of Pittsburgh.

## Events

### Tara Cook Memorial Neuropalliative Care Visiting Professor Lecture

This annual lecture series honors the memory of Tara Cook, MD, a beloved and highly regarded faculty member in the Section of Palliative Care and Medical Ethics who passed away in 2021.

In October 2023, Claire Creutzfeldt, MD, University of Washington, presented "Integrating Neuropalliative Care into Our Practice" to palliative care clinicians.

### Holiday Gatherings

The palliative care team gathered to celebrate the 2023 holiday season.

# Program Highlights

## Pharmacy Collaboration Improves Patient Experience

**Maria Lowry, PharmD**, palliative care clinical pharmacy specialist, established a transitions of care clinic to support a smoother transition between the hospital stay and home as it pertains to managing medications. Maria explained, "Many of our patients have a long list of complex medications where medication misadventures can occur. My goal was to minimize readmissions due to medications, unmet symptom needs, or medication errors."

Referred to as "Palliative Care Interventions surrounding Medication Prescribing Across Care Transitions (IMPACT)," the collaborative initiative included the inpatient palliative care team at UPMC Shadyside, outpatient palliative care team at UPMC Hillman Cancer Center, and palliative care clinical pharmacist. Patients contacted in the early post hospital discharge period through the "IMPACT" program yielded a reduction in seven-day readmission rates compared to those patients who were not contacted by the pharmacist.

Maria summarized, "This highlights the medical complexity of this patient population and the need for short-term follow-up to improve symptom burden and educate patients on their medications following hospitalization. These results could be related to a patient's better understanding of expectations surrounding pharmacologic therapy."

## Palliative Care Curriculum for Nurses

Donna Durant, senior CRNP, is pursuing her DNP at Duquesne University. As part of her coursework, Donna is developing a curriculum for nurses specific to palliative care.

In response to what she sees in the clinical setting, Donna is using her further education as an opportunity to research why nurses feel distress, moral injury, and overall stress. Her interest is to "meet bedside nurses where they are and guide them to find meaning and joy on the difficult days," describes Donna. For example, to combat intense moral stress, Donna advises nurses to 'ink shed,'

meaning to write about the day, their work, and their feelings and to find release in that creative outlet.

Her research identified the lack of standardized hospice or palliative care training being taught to nurses at orientation or in residency. Additionally, she recognized that many new nurses had never experienced a patient death.

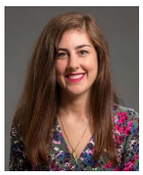
These findings are informing her curriculum to create a better experience for both patients and nurses. Says Donna, "My hope is that we can integrate finding moments of joy and meaning into all settings, and I am actively advocating for more understanding around palliative care. This knowledge should be available to all nurses who meet patients with serious illness."

## Faculty Spotlight

**Amar Bansal, MD**, works as both a palliative care and nephrology physician and is the associate program director for Nephrology. He has been selected as a winner of the UPMC Physician Excellence in Clinical Care Award in the Early-to-Mid-Career category.

Dr. Bansal excels as a clinician, educator, and mentor. Feedback from his patients, peers, and mentees speaks to an aspirational level of professional integrity and dedication to his patients, many of whom live with complex medical conditions. He demonstrates exceptional skill at tailoring his teaching to the needs of his learners and is an outstanding and compassionate advocate for his trainees as well as his patients.

He is described as one who leads by example in managing challenging situations with tact and equanimity and inspires everyone he meets to strive for a culture of excellence. Additionally, he has taken measures to promote physician wellness within his division, soliciting feedback and implementing innovative and beneficial initiatives.



**Gina Piscitello, MD, MS**, had a busy year as a research fellow at the Palliative Research Center. Dr. Piscitello was named a fellow of the **Beckwith Center for Shared Decision-Making** Physician Fellowship in September and published four first-author manuscripts in journals including JPSM, Critical Care Medicine and Chest.

**Read Dr. Piscitello's research here**. In addition, Dr. Piscitello spoke at conferences and events throughout the year, including the American Society for Bioethics and Humanities 25th Annual Conference. Her research and presentations focused primarily on improving equitable delivery of healthcare in the context of serious disease.

Dr. Piscitello transitioned from research fellow to assistant professor of Medicine in the Department of Medicine, Division of General Internal Medicine, Section of Palliative Care and Medical Ethics at the University of Pittsburgh as of January 2024.

## Awards

**Rene Claxton, MD**, received the inaugural Robert Arnold Teaching and Mentoring Award as well as the Tara E. Cook Hospice and Palliative Medicine Annual Teaching Award in recognition of her exceptional efforts in this regard.

**Sherry Gunn, LCSW**, senior social worker, palliative and supportive care, UPMC Mercy, was chosen as a UPMC ACES Winner. The ACES Award honors staff who exemplify UPMC's core values.

**Yael Schenker, MD, MAS, FAAHPM**, was selected as a 2023 recipient of the Merrill J. Egorin Excellence in Scientific Leadership Award which honors UPMC Hillman Cancer Center Research faculty members who display biomedical expertise, scientific passion, and scholarly dedication.

# Training and Education

## Palliative Education and Training (PET) Day

PET Days resumed in person in April 2023. Currently, two sessions are planned for 2024 (April and September). The sessions focus on education and training for our interdisciplinary team members and offer an opportunity for connection and networking with colleagues. The April 2024 session will focus on connections across the continuum of serious illness care, substance abuse disorders, and existential distress.

## University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine Medical Education (Med Ed) Day

**Rene Claxton, MD**, presented at the September 2023 Med Ed Day to an audience of faculty, residents, and fellows. Titled "Ready When 'Cold' Called Upon," Dr. Claxton's presentation applied "Teach Like a Champion" strategies to the medical education setting.

## Diversity and Inclusion

### Church Initiative Update

PaRC researchers and Section clinicians partnered with Macedonia Church of Pittsburgh to strengthen church lay ministers' understanding of advance care planning and other topics related to aging and illness. **Justin Yu, MD, MS**, along with **Amanda Tompkins, MD**, and **Mikisa Solomon, MD**, and other members of the UPMC palliative care team presented information to the group, and learned how Pittsburgh clinicians can better support the Macedonia community. We are grateful for this partnership and are looking forward to expanding this program throughout the city.

## Welcome New Team Members!

**Julia Nebel, CRNP**, outpatient palliative care, UPMC Hillman Cancer Center

**Wendy Myers, MSW**, inpatient palliative care, UPMC Mercy

**Talia Padawer, MSW**, inpatient palliative care, UPMC Shadyside

**Brian Molcan, MSW**, inpatient palliative care, UPMC Presbyterian

**Sarah Slater**, PaRC/Section research and administrative coordinator

**Gina Piscitello, MD, MS**, assistant professor of medicine

## PaRC (Palliative Research Center)

### Pathways to Palliative Care

Students and faculty from University of Pittsburgh's Schools of Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Social Work, and Public Health gathered in November 2023 to enjoy an evening of palliative care research storytelling followed by speed networking. A special thank you to **Gina Piscitello, MD, MS**, **Justin Yu, MD, MS**, and **Margaret Rosenzweig, PHD, CRNP-C, AOCNP, FAAN**, for sharing their inspiring real-life research stories.

"If we want patients to trust us, we have to tell them what's going on," said Dr. Piscitello.

**Learn more about Pathways to Palliative Care**

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## Gleitsman Scholars Program

*"I really hadn't heard that much about palliative care before. [During my visit to Pittsburgh,] it was very clear to me that palliative care is about the patients and seeing them as people and not just their sickness."*

**Adaugo Okpareke, BS**
Morehouse School of Medicine

In August, PaRC celebrated our 2023 Gleitsman program scholars at a virtual graduation event, where they reflected on their palliative care research experience with the University of Pittsburgh. Scholars discussed their future research journey with mentors and the PaRC team, — a journey we're eager to follow!

As 2024 CARE-Gleitsman Scholars, first-year medical students will participate in a mentored research experience in supportive oncology and palliative care at the University of Pittsburgh this summer.

**Learn more**

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## Recognitions and Awards

**Yael Schenker, MD, MAS, FAAHPM**, has been appointed the new section editor for Symptom Control and Palliative Care for the journal Cancer.

**Sarah Belcher, PhD, RN, OCN**, received a Clinical Research Loan Repayment Award from the National Cancer Institute and **Kelly Harris, MD, MS**, was selected for the NIH Loan Repayment Program through NHLBI.

## Spotlight on GeriPal Podcasts

**Karen Moss, PhD, RN, CNL**, a 2023 participant in the PaRC Junior Faculty Visiting Professor Program, shared her insights during her visit to the University of California San Francisco: **Black/African American Caregivers of Older Adults Living with Dementia: Fayron Epps and Karen Moss (geripal.org)**

**Robert Arnold, MD**, discussed his article, **"The Language of Serious Illness."**, on **GeriPal**.

## Select Publications

**Hailey Bulls, PhD, Yael Schenker, MD, MAS, FAAHPM, and Jessica Merlin, MD, PhD, MBA**, published **"I Refused to Get Addicted to Opioids"** in The Journal of Pain.

**Drs. Arnold, Bulls, and Merlin** published **"Expert consensus-based guidance on approaches to opioid management in individuals with advanced cancer-related pain and nonmedical stimulant use."**

Dr. Schenker's essay, **Talking About Dying**, was published in JAMA Internal Medicine.

Dr. Rosenzweig's article, **Effects of Socioeconomic Status and Race on Survival and Treatment in Metastatic Breast Cancer**, was recently published in NPJ Breast Cancer.

## Supporting Palliative Care

Through education, research, community partners, and clinical programs, we are discovering and implementing innovative ways to enhance quality of life for all patients and families living with serious illness.

### Your gift matters.

**Make a difference today**

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