

Chemo Companions Program

Medical and graduate students take on new roles in patient care

Understanding both a patient's need for support during the cancer journey and the importance for medical students to personally connect with those they care for led to the creation of Chemo Companions in 2016. Through this program, students assume a companion/support role with cancer patients currently receiving chemotherapy at one of Mount Sinai's cancer centers. This is the story of Chemo Companions from its 2016 inception to today.

Research has demonstrated that volunteers can have a positive impact on patients and their families throughout the cancer journey. Social support has been correlated with improved psychological well-being and physical health, and the companionship of a volunteer can be a key component of that support. Volunteers have been shown to positively affect the outcome of patients' treatments, reducing symptoms and increasing survival rates.¹ Studies have also found that a lack of social support, including the absence of friends and close relatives, significantly correlates with lower survival rates.² Similar findings demonstrate that patients who report more satisfaction with their social support networks experience greater functional well-being.³

The Program's Home

Mount Sinai Hospital, founded in 1852, is one of the nation's largest, serving a diverse population. In 2013 Mount Sinai Hospital merged with several other hospitals in New York City to become the Mount Sinai Health System, which now includes seven hospital campuses. Mount Sinai Hospital is the largest hospital in the system, including more than 1,000 inpatient beds and numerous outpatient hospital centers and urgent care settings. The hospital is unique in its location, situated between the Upper East Side

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and Harlem in New York City. The hospital's oncology service line includes eight ambulatory practices. Of these, Ruttenberg Treatment Center and Dubin Breast Center see the most patients.

The Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, which also includes the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, is an international leader in medical and scientific training, biomedical

research, and patient care. It is the medical school for the Mount Sinai Health System, and it is home to more than 5,000 faculty and nearly 2,000 students, residents, and fellows.

In 2016 staff from the Rutenberg Treatment Center and Dubin Breast Center collaborated with students from the Icahn School of Medicine to establish the Chemo Companions program at the cancer centers, where it continues today. The cancer center's former medical director, its social work leadership team, and two medical students founded the program—the first of its kind for the centers. The aim of the program is twofold: to address requests from medical and graduate students who want to better connect with patients and to address patients' need for companionship during lengthy chemotherapy treatment.

The Chemo Companions program provides a different type of benefit than the structured support provided by our clinical social workers, chaplaincy, and complementary therapies, while also furthering the education of medical and graduate students. The program is an extension of our pre-existing cancer center volunteer services. Typically, our volunteers provide companionship, emotional and social support, and information to patients throughout our outpatient and inpatient services. Volunteers help patients and caregivers navigate the cancer center's services to ensure that their experience is as smooth and comfortable as possible. Volunteers complement other support services available

through social work, psychiatry, nutrition, supportive oncology, patient-centered staff, and medical teams.

Chemo Companions Training

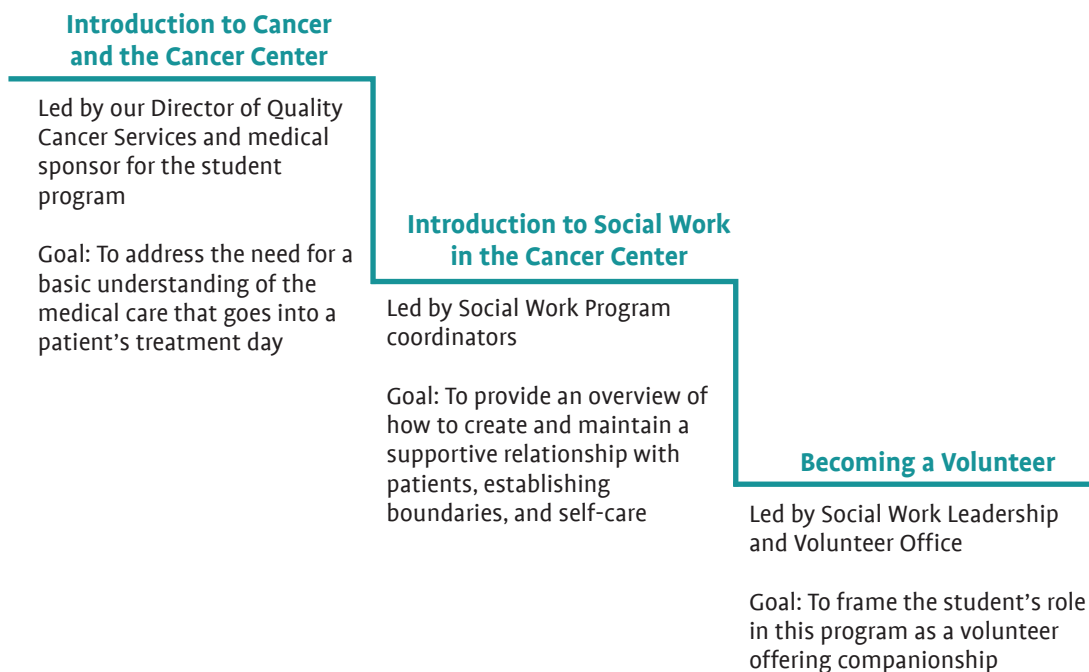
In 2016 we created a one-hour didactic training session for all prospective students composed of three focus areas: 1) Introduction to Cancer and the Cancer Center, 2) Introduction to Social Work in the Cancer Center, and 3) Becoming a Volunteer (see Figure 1, below).

Introduction to Cancer and the Cancer Center

Student leaders recruit first-year medical and graduate students and genetic counseling students through the summer activities fair, our largest recruitment effort of the year. We start training with Introduction to Cancer and the Cancer Center. The Mount Sinai director of quality for cancer, who is the medical sponsor of the student program, leads the cancer didactic. This educational piece gives students a basic understanding of cancer and its associated treatments.

The content provides an overview of cancer prevalence in the United States, with a specific focus on Mount Sinai Hospital's surrounding community and its rates of cancer prevalence. Students are educated about the complex medical care that goes into a day of treatment for a patient at the cancer center. Students receive a tour of the center and learn about the check-in process

Figure 1. Overview of One-Hour Didactic Training for Prospective Volunteers



at the infusion center, lab draws and results, pre-treatment regimen, infusion treatment, hydration, and other details that encompass each day of a patient’s treatment. Students learn the general side effects of cancer treatment medications to prepare them for what they may expect in their patient interactions.

Introduction to Social Work in the Cancer Center

During this portion of the didactic, students learn about their chemo companion role in depth. Social work leaders prepare students for their initial meeting with their patients. Students are instructed to discuss with patients their timeline of involvement with the program, which is encouraged to be at least one academic year. Students learn how to build trust and rapport with patients, meeting them where they are in the moment and maintaining healthy boundaries. We review how to validate a patient’s feelings by being present, listening empathically, and respecting confidentiality. Given the delicate nature of this work and their many academic responsibilities, we urge students to be mindful of their feelings and practice self-care.

Becoming a Volunteer

Lastly, in the Becoming a Volunteer part of the orientation, social work leaders collaborate with the Volunteer Office liaison to onboard students as volunteers in the cancer center. The goal is to define students’ roles as volunteers as separate from their roles as medical students to discourage patients and students from addressing the medical aspects of their care. To be onboarded, students must:

- Complete a volunteer application
- Review the volunteer handbook
- Review an outline of the aspects of the volunteer role.

Because volunteers are already students at our hospital, they have taken part in many of the necessary volunteer training criteria, including Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act training and medical clearance. Midway through the year, a second training for interested students often occurs.

Program Leadership Roles

Social work leadership and student leaders oversee the Chemo Companions program, and each has clearly defined roles (see Figure 2, above). Student leaders recruit students into the program, and social work leaders manage student schedules and match students with individual patients. Social work leaders are responsible for referring, training, and supervising students by being available to them and facilitating quarterly debrief sessions. These sessions provide opportunities for student volunteers to share, discuss, and process their feelings about their relationships with patients. Oncology clinical practitioners from varying disciplines join the sessions to share their experiences with patients and how it has personally affected their work.

Two students are partnered with each patient. If possible, we pair students from different programs (medicine, genetic counseling, and graduate programs) to expand student availability and ensure that patients have a companion during each treatment

Figure 2. Chemo Companions Program Leadership Roles

Social Work Leadership Role	Student Leadership Role
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responsible for the training of new students Manage the promotion of the program to staff for patient recruitment Oversee patient referrals; Organize student matching with patients Supervise students through quarterly debrief sessions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responsible for the recruitment of new students Liaise between students and cancer center staff Manage students’ schedules for training and debrief sessions

appointment. We encourage students to meet with their patients for a minimum of one hour per week, although some students have spent several hours with patients during lengthy treatments. Some student-patient pairs have maintained contact post-treatment, and others have not (see Figure 3, page 44).

Patient Referrals

The Chemo Companions program is a targeted intervention for patients with limited social support. Eligible patients include those who come alone to treatment and those who express feelings of loneliness during long treatment days.

Main referral sources have been infusion nurses and social workers. We also advertise the program throughout the cancer center in various ways. Announcements are made at each employee meeting to educate staff about the program and referral process. Fliers are posted on the iPads that are provided to patients during long wait times. And the program is included in the monthly calendar newsletter that highlights our support programs. Finally, our volunteers are a wonderful referral source, because they are often walking around telling patients about the program and gauging interest.

Program Challenges

Due to continual changes in students’ schedules, student leaders often phase out of the program. This turnover has affected the continuity and growth of Chemo Companions. With the exception of the student founders, succeeding student leaders have been unable to commit to the leadership role for long periods of time, due to their demanding school schedules.

To best accommodate these transitions for patients and students, social work leadership now matches patients with students—originally a task of student leaders. This process change allows social work leadership to maintain a close, ongoing connection to the students enrolled in the program and ensures a limited time lapse between receiving patient referrals to matching patients with students.

Another challenge we faced was maintaining student motivation and interest in the program during the lag time between orientation and pairing students with patients. This gap was often caused by waiting for appropriate patient referrals. Historically, there have been more students trained than patient referrals, resulting in a wait time for students.

Through ongoing discussions between staff and crucial student feedback, we have added a new dimension to the program, which allows students to volunteer in a useful way while awaiting their patient matches. Specifically, students serve as supportive volunteers in the infusion areas by:

- Providing companionship and support to patients identified while rounding
- Responding to non-medical questions regarding the Ruttenberg Treatment Center and Dubin Breast Center
- Familiarizing patients and caregivers with support and wellness programs, specifically the Chemo Companions Program
- Distributing lunch and/or snacks to patients.

Outcomes

Although we have yet to collect formal data on the program, anecdotal feedback has shown it to have a positive impact on everyone involved (see Figure 3, below).

One student reported how meaningful it was to celebrate with her patient and her patient’s family the last day of treatment. She had been meeting with the patient and his family members on a weekly basis for more than three months. She was present for

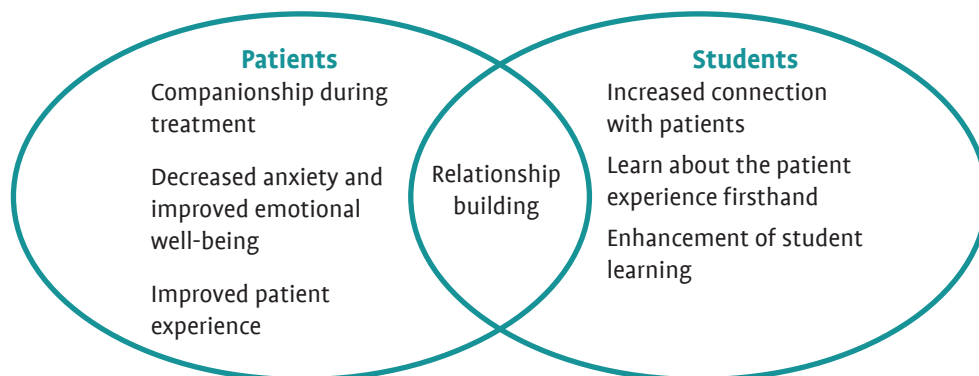
many ups and downs with his treatment and subsequent side effects. She formed a relationship with not only the patient but also with members of his family, often taking walks with them to provide support when the patient was lethargic and requested time to sleep. On the last day of treatment, the patient, his family, and the student joined together in celebration and a look back over the past months. The student described this meeting as one of warmth, gratefulness, and hopeful anticipation. She reported a sense of reward for being able to provide support to the patient and family during one of the most stressful periods in their lives.

Another student noted that the program enabled him to gain insight into the patient perspective, which he says he will bring with him on his professional journey. This young student (in his mid-20s) had no previous experience with someone struggling with an acute illness. The patient he worked with was open to discussing his thoughts and feelings about living with cancer and navigating the healthcare system. The student reported that much of what he learned from the patient he had not considered before, such as:

- The effect of high medication co-pays and how that may impact medication compliance
- The importance of having an advocate for patients with limited support systems
- The feelings that accompany a cancer diagnosis, including fear, anxiety, gratitude, guilt, and acceptance.

Another student shared the anxiety he felt prior to meeting his patient, saying that he felt uncomfortable supporting someone during this vulnerable and difficult period. His patient was not very talkative and liked to just sit and watch TV while receiving chemo. Social work leadership encouraged the student to take the patient’s lead and sit with him and watch TV as well. After a few weeks, this relationship progressed, and the student and patient began playing cards together. In time, the patient opened

Figure 3. The Patient and Student Relationship




up a bit. He was never very talkative, but both the patient and student grew comfortable with one another, and toward the end of treatment the patient expressed appreciation to the student for his presence. The student now describes feeling fortunate for having been part of a program that strengthened his commitment to form deeper relationships with his patients, saying that this skill will assist him in providing the best care possible as a physician.

Looking Ahead

We are currently working to develop a measuring tool to evaluate patient outcomes as a result of the Chemo Companions program, specifically focusing on patients' satisfaction with the program and their depression level before and after their participation in it. We have identified the following goals in an effort to improve the structure of the program, as well as the patient and student experience:

- Evaluate and/or measure data on patient and student outcomes as a result of the program
- Restructure and redistribute the roles of patients and staff leaders
- Set clear expectations for student leaders while being realistic about their busy schedules
- Expand the Chemo Companion role to include patients in inpatient oncology units
- Minimize the lag time between student orientation and patient pairing
- Encourage students to volunteer in other areas throughout the center, including rounding in the infusion areas to check

in with patients, psycho-education about the Chemo Companions program and promotion of the program, and acting as a patient liaison in waiting rooms.

Since the Chemo Companions program began nearly three years ago, approximately 80 students and 40 patients have participated. The program is highly regarded by staff at all levels, which has increased referrals, allowing us to pair most interested students with patients. 

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