

Award Recipient:
Alexander K. Smith, MD
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School of Medicine

Project:
“Palliative Concerns of Frail Elders from
Diverse Communities”

Palliative care has traditionally focused on the needs of younger patients with cancer. Older patients, whose end-of-life trajectories are often characterized by frailty, have not been well studied. To fill this gap in our understanding, I will study the palliative concerns of frail elders in San Francisco's On Lok program.

On Lok is the prototype Program of All-inclusive Care for the Elderly, where enrolled participants visit health centers during the day and return to their homes in the evening. We have seen that with On Lok participants, the burden of functional impairment and comorbid illness is high and the average prognosis is 4.5 years from the time of enrollment. As a result of my previous research, I have gained an appreciation of the profound influence of culture on attitudes, preferences, and end-of-life experiences. Since palliative needs are likely to be influenced by culture and ethnicity, it is critically important that this research be conducted in diverse populations.

The specific aims of my research are to: 1) use a mixed-methods quantitative and qualitative survey to ascertain the palliative concerns of frail elders, including promotion of well-being and relief of suffering, aging and loss of independence, and communication about prognosis; and

2) explore the influence of ethnicity and culture on palliative concerns. With support from my Society of General Internal Medicine-Association of Chiefs of General Internal Medicine-ASP T. Franklin Williams Scholars Award in Geriatrics and KL2 career development award, I plan to examine the role ethnicity and culture play on older adults' palliative concerns. I propose to interview a multi-ethnic cohort of frail elders enrolled in On Lok, including 20 Chinese-American, 20 Latino-American, 20 African-American, and 20 Anglo-American patients, their family caregivers, and health care providers.

Frailty research, as it is traditionally defined, is primarily focused on prevention and restoration of function. I anticipate that the findings from my study will influence the paradigm of frailty research to include: critical questions that would address the best way to optimize the quality of life during the years that remain for frail elders; needs of frail elders with regard to communication, caregivers, and symptoms; and the palliative concerns of frail elders from diverse communities.

Through the support of my awards and my mentorship team, I will advance my career as a physician-scientist by actively participating in the National Institute on Aging (NIA) funded University of California, San Francisco, School of Medicine's Center for Aging in Diverse Communities. The center is part of the NIA's Research Center for Minority Aging program. I also plan to continue developing and disseminating information on a geriatrics and palliative care blog I co-developed, GeriPal.org. The blog provides an open forum for discourse, recent news and research, and freethinking commentary about geriatrics and palliative care. Lastly, I plan to use the findings from this project as the foundation for an R01 application. Ultimately, I aim to integrate my interests in general internal medicine, palliative medicine, and geriatrics to develop interventions to improve care delivered to frail elderly patients.

**Society of General
Internal Medicine-
Association of Chiefs of
General Internal
Medicine-ASP T. Franklin
Williams Scholars Award
in Geriatrics**



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2010 AWARDS