



## RDPG Student Spotlight: Nancy Sacks, MS, RD, LDN

**Degree pursuing:** Doctorate in Clinical Nutrition

**University:** Rutgers – The State University of New Jersey, School of Health Related Professions

**Research area(s) of interest:** Nutrition Status in the Pediatric Oncology Population, Proactive Nutrition Intervention, Relationship of Nutrition Status to Outcomes

### **1. Describe your path (education, work experience, etc.) that led you to pursue a degree in nutrition and/or nutrition research.**

During my senior year in high school, I took courses in psychology and nutrition at a community college. I applied to five schools for nutrition and one for psychology. I have always been interested in understanding people better and how to help them. I was accepted at all six schools and chose to attend the one for psychology. However, the classes didn't really seem to be that interesting to me, and I had second thoughts about the major I chose, so I took a break from school and moved home.

I later applied to the University of Arizona and was accepted into their nutrition program. My course of study was clinical nutrition. It took five years to complete before receiving a B.S. in Clinical Nutrition and Dietetics. During this time I worked in foodservice departments at two of the largest hospitals in Tucson to get as much experience as possible.

I needed to complete an internship and had not yet applied, so I sent over 100 letters seeking employment to see if anyone was interested in hiring me without my RD. Sadly, not one positive response. This was the turning point for me in my career when I found my direction. Supporting my father with his pancreatic cancer diagnosis, care, nutrition support, and having intimate conversations with him led me to my career pursuit to help children with cancer.

I completed my M.S. degree and internship at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, VA. I met two very important mentors during my internship in Roanoke, VA: Dr. Ryland Webb and Julie Watts-Mulligan.

I consider myself very fortunate to have had both of these people in my life and try to live by their examples.

While I was at Virginia Tech, I took every opportunity learn about the changes that occur during metabolism of nutrients in people with cancer. It became my focus for every project, and my thesis was related to the use of Marinol in adult patients undergoing chemotherapy. There were some job opportunities while I was in Blacksburg including working as a supervisor in metabolic studies and as an outpatient RD in a community hospital, so I used this time to learn whatever I could in these areas.

After completing my degree, I relocated to Shands Hospital in Gainesville, FL, to work in a Clinical Research Center. My responsibilities included development of recipes and tube feedings for patients who were on studies using labeled isotopes evaluating cholesterol metabolism, pharmacokinetic studies, and a variety of other phase I, II, and III studies. I had the opportunity to work on the development of a protocol that evaluated the use of trophic feeds in the premature population of patients in the NICU. I felt that this position did not afford me with the variety of experience I was interested in and after a year I pursued pediatric opportunities.

I was offered a position at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) and eagerly accepted. This was 27 years ago. At the time there were four inpatient RDs, two outpatient RDs, and the Director of the Department. I worked with infants (premature/transitional) in a variety of units (intensive care, cardiology step down, neurology, BMT (Bone Marrow Transplant), oncology). After six months I worked only with the BMT and oncology populations. I worked in the inpatient and outpatient settings and after almost 8 years took a break from CHOP and went back to school for a post master's certificate in clinical research. During this time I did some consulting work developing educational material for an insurance company and also taught some classes at universities. I returned to CHOP to work in the Division of Oncology 14 years ago and worked my way up to Research Coordinator for Phase I, II, and III studies as well as supportive care studies. I also worked in the outpatient oncology clinic with children receiving therapy and the childhood cancer survivorship program.

I have been the principal investigator for some studies including: Proactive enteral tube feeding in children at high risk for nutritional problems for newly diagnosed solid or brain tumors or AML (Acute Myeloid Leukemia), Nutritional Status in Survivors with brain and solid tumors, Nutritional Status in Survivors with solid tumors, and Nutritional Status in a heterogeneous group of childhood cancer patients.

When my mom passed away from ovarian cancer about nine years ago, I made a decision to go back to school and complete my doctorate. The most important mentors in my life were my parents. I realized I had an opportunity to contribute to the field of nutrition for the pediatric oncology population because of everything they had done for me.

**2. What did or is your graduate work focused on? Discuss your area of research or practice, dissertation or thesis topic, etc. Describe 1-2 highlights of your research career thus far.**

**M.S. Thesis Topic - The use of Marinol in adults receiving chemotherapy**

**D.C.N. Outcomes Study Topic - Evaluation of Nutritional Status in a Cohort of Childhood Cancer Survivors with Solid Tumors: A Longitudinal Study**

**• Proactive enteral tube feeding in children newly diagnosed with solid or brain tumor or AML**

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- Questionnaire on clinical nutrition practice through COG (Children's Oncology Group)
- Multidisciplinary review of clinical nutrition practice in pediatric oncology patients

#### Current work through pediatric subunit

##### ONDPG Pediatric Subunit - Background

The Oncology Dietetics Practice Group (ONDPG) recently approved the formation of a pediatric sub-unit to provide pediatric oncology dietitians with a forum to address the inconsistencies in care through the development of nutrition-specific guidelines, dissemination of research and resources, and collaboration with other pediatric and/or oncology-specific nutrition groups. By reaching out to expert RDNs for their involvement we are empowering RDNs to fill in the gaps of the literature to better support their patients. Some RDNs may not have the resources or supports to pursue research opportunities independently, so we are hoping to encourage research involvement and thereby promote RDNs nutrition leaders in pediatric oncology nutrition.

The formation of the ONDPG Pediatric Subunit holds great promise for this specialized group of dietitians and their patients. There are over 200 pediatric cancer centers across the nation. Currently, nutrition research, guidelines, and evidence-based practice in pediatric cancer are under-developed. This new pediatric sub-unit should address these issues by doing the following for pediatric oncology dietitians:

- Improve networking and collaboration
- Disperse the latest pediatric oncology nutrition research
- Share evidence-based resources
- Develop considerations for and proactive nutrition support/intervention

The recent ONDPG 2016 Oncology Nutrition Symposium provided the Pediatric Sub-unit the opportunity to meet with pediatric oncology dietitians. Some of these members presented posters demonstrating their desire to help provide insight into the unique challenges for childhood cancer patients and survivors. The symposium also afforded the sub-unit leadership team the opportunity to meet one-on-one with pediatric oncology dietitians. During our lunch table sessions, we heard and took note of the obstacles pediatric oncology dietitians face, including lack of research, lack of evidence-based nutrition interventions, and inconsistencies with type and timing of nutrition intervention among physicians between facilities and in some cases within the same institution. The information collected at the symposium has helped to guide the sub-unit's goals to focus directly on the needs of the pediatric oncology dietitian.

## 2. Objectives for the proposed concept.

### a. Nutrition Assessment/Status

- Primary: To develop, validate and distribute a survey that will evaluate the nutrition assessment and clinical practice management methods utilized by Registered Dietitian/Nutritionists (RDNS) working with pediatric oncology patients.
- Secondary: To evaluate the nutrition assessment methods utilized by registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) work-

ing with pediatric oncology patients and propose a set of best practices for nutrition assessment in this population

### b. Proactive Nutrition Intervention Algorithm

- Primary: To develop a proactive nutrition intervention algorithm for clinicians working with the pediatric oncology population
- Secondary: To evaluate the impact a proactive nutrition intervention algorithm has on the outcome of nutrition status of pediatric oncology patients.

## 3. What are your plans for the future (e.g. academia, government, industry, etc.)?

- Continue to work with peds subunit
- Complete doctorate degree
- Work on research projects (intervention/outcomes)
- Develop a mentorship program

## 4. List any published work if applicable. Authors listed first, journals italicized

A Multidisciplinary Review of Nutrition Considerations in the Pediatric Oncology Population: A Perspective from Children's Oncology Group. *Nutr Clin Pract* 2005; 20; 377. Elena J. Ladas, Nancy Sacks, Lillian Meacham, et al.

Standards of Nutritional Care in Pediatric Oncology: Results from a Nationwide Survey on the Standards of Practice in Pediatric Oncology. A Children's Oncology Group Study. *Pediatr Blood Cancer* 2006; 46: 339-344. Elena J. Ladas, Nancy Sacks, Pat Brophy, and Paul C. Roberts.

Proactive Enteral Tube Feeding in Pediatric Patients Undergoing Chemotherapy. Nancy Sacks, et al. *Pediatr Blood Cancer* 2013. Wiley Periodicals, Inc. DOI 10.1002/pbc.24759

## 5. What advice would you give to other students wanting to pursue research?

Take some courses – post master's certificate or something through work. Find a mentor, someone willing to work with you on a project and learn what needs to be done. Don't rely on others to do the work – learn to do what is required.

Start small and ask questions.

Interested in being interviewed for the Student Spotlight? Email [rachel.paul@tc.columbia.edu](mailto:rachel.paul@tc.columbia.edu) and Claire Chenault [margaret-claire.chenault@drexel.edu](mailto:margaret-claire.chenault@drexel.edu).