Preparation of Nurse Scientists: Opportunities at the National Cancer Institute

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Importance of Postdoctoral Training

The progress that has been made in the understanding of cancer and the ability to detect and treat it has changed the way we think about some cancers from acute to chronic illnesses. Doctoral preparation coupled with rigorous postdoctoral training experience will equip oncology nurse researchers with the necessary skills and knowledge to respond to this new challenge of change. By virtue of education in the diversity of methodologic approaches to studying cancer, nurse scientists are well positioned to contribute to the growing knowledge of the biology, etiology, prevention, and treatment of cancer and related morbidities.

Although doctoral preparation is a necessary first step in preparing nurse scientists, training beyond the doctoral level now is considered an essential next step. A number of experts have concluded that, in the life sciences, a formal, postdoctoral experience is “virtually mandatory for obtaining a regular position in academia or industry. One reason for this is that graduate school programs cannot alone provide the broad range of knowledge and skills required for modern research” (National Academy of Sciences, 2000, p. viii).

Essential Components of Postdoctoral Training

Irrespective of the discipline, the primary purpose of any postdoctoral experience should be to broaden and deepen research and related skills necessary for contributing significantly to the field of study and, ultimately, society. To accomplish this goal, a high-quality postdoctoral experience should be a full-time program, range from three to five years in length, and offer a variety of learning opportunities, such as formal classes, lectures, and courses, as well as a structured mentored experience.

National Cancer Institute’s Mission

The mission of NCI is broad-based, focusing on conducting and supporting research as well as training; disseminating healthcare information with respect to the cause, diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of cancer and rehabilitation from it; and continuing the care of patients with cancer and their families (NCI, 2001). With regard to its educational and training mission, NCI supports educational and training and training in fundamental sciences and clinical disciplines for participation in basic and clinical research programs and treatment programs relating to cancer through career awards, training grants, and fellowships. NCI also collaborates with volunteer organizations and other national and foreign institutions engaged in cancer research and training activities.

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