

Opportunities Are Knocking, Are You Listening?

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We are trained to use evidence-based medicine from the beginning of medical school; residency hones these skills. Radiation oncology is a particularly data-driven field. When we start residency, we know we are going to be doing a fair amount of research, likely via lab projects or evaluating treatment outcomes in one disease site or another. But numerous other possibilities outside of clinic have powerful benefits, particularly regarding advocacy.

Radiation oncology is a cost-effective, innovative field that is fundamental to cancer treatment and is well-suited to modern technological advancements. Unfortunately, it has been hampered by decreased funding, political constraints (including partisan deadlock, insurance mandates, and lack of information), and diminished interest from medical students (largely due to unsubstantiated claims and fears surrounding the job market). We continue to see the effects of this every year in the National Resident Matching Program. As such, advocacy plays a vital role, but our training grants us little exposure.

Understanding the political nature of our field can teach us how to challenge policy, educate and inspire prospective students, and fight for our patients. This is especially important for trainees, as this is the field we will inherit. One of the best ways to do this is to become involved in volunteer organizations. There are countless opportunities to engage in advocacy and leadership; sometimes all it takes is a cold email. Before you know it, you might find yourself on a teleconference with leaders of major global cancer organizations, lobbying heads of state, flying to a climate conference in the Middle East, or exploring any other charted or uncharted

territory. These possibilities not only foster your professional development (and have obvious resume benefits), but also influence your personal life and growth. While I still think patients are the most rewarding part of our work, being involved in volunteer organizations and leadership can create a very well-rounded resident.

Going beyond the traditional residency research routes and exploring new avenues of engagement with our field can challenge your perspectives, broaden your network, introduce you to mentors, strengthen your skills as a physician, and ultimately change you as a person. It can open new doors that not only were closed, but which you didn't even know existed. I have been fortunate enough to discover some of these doors, from participating on the emergency taskforce of the Global Coalition for Radiotherapy and working with global oncology leaders, to learning about our carbon footprint with the Climate Health, Equity, and Sustainability Taskforce. And I hope to one day climb the Dolomites with the Radiating Hope society.

I encourage all residents to seek opportunity, reach out to big names and little names, connect with other residents, and simply ask around; the worst someone can say is "no." There is great satisfaction and joy in being involved in things that are bigger than you, especially doing so in fun and engaging ways that play off your passions and curiosities. When you can do this while contributing to the greater needs of the field, it is even more fulfilling. It reminds you that being a radiation oncologist isn't one size fits all; we get to choose our own adventure.

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