

## Inaugural Year of the Graduate Diploma in Oncology 2020-2021

In September 2020, the Gerald Bronfman Department of Oncology launched the Graduate Diploma in Oncology for the 2020-2021 academic year. This unique 30-credit program provides students the opportunity to gain exposure to the principles and practice of oncology, as well as its research domains, while exploring in more detail one of four areas of focus: population and global cancer control, psychosocial oncology/palliative care, clinical cancer research or cancer care services and quality. There are two important courses in the Diploma: 1) the two-semester course, ONCO 610-Fundamentals of Oncology and Cancer Research, which provides all students in the program an overview of the many facets of cancer research and clinical care, and 2) ONCO 630-Oncology Practicum, which allows students to conduct a one-semester research project in their chosen area of focus. Other courses developed for the Graduate Diploma in Oncology include, ONCO 620-Best Practices in Biomedical Research, taken by all students in the program, as well as ONCO 615-Principles and Practice of Clinical Trials, ONCO 625-Quality Improvement Principles and Methods and ONCO 635-Qualitative and Psychosocial Health Research, designed for specific areas of focus but open to all students in the program. The Diploma can be completed in one year by full-time students and within two and a half years by part-time students.

In its inaugural year, the program had eight students, of whom six were full-time and two were part-time. Five students focused on clinical cancer research, two on population and global cancer control and one on psychosocial oncology/palliative care. There was a broad range of practicum projects conducted by the full-time students. Topics included lung cancer, women's cancers, patient support, tumor boards, and the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the patient experience. Specific titles (area of focus) include:

- Lung cancer treatment pattern during COVID-19 era, wait-time and outcomes A retrospective chart review (clinical cancer research).
- Can a ketogenic diet contribute to a decrease in ovarian or endometrial cancer recurrence? (clinical cancer research).
- Assessment of the clinical utility of molecular tumor board (clinical cancer research).
- OncoBuddy and OncoConseil - A research project to integrate peer-to-peer support and peer advice into the Opal patient portal (clinical cancer research).
- A review of ethical and legal aspects of gender-neutral human papillomavirus vaccination (population and global cancer control).
- Better understanding distress and quality of life trajectories in oncology patients during the COVID-19 pandemic: Longitudinal prospective study to guide supportive interventions (psychosocial oncology/palliative care).

The feedback from the first cohort of graduating students has been very positive. According to one of the students:

*Choosing to go into this program was one of the greatest decisions of my life - I had just finished my undergraduate degree and I was looking for something that didn't have a long time commitment, and that was interesting and applicable to me. I couldn't have made a better*

*decision because looking back, I wouldn't be where I am today without it. This program allows you to choose a specific area of focus, and I chose Clinical Cancer Research, so I was able to learn about clinical trials in graduate studies and use this knowledge to jump right into clinical research after completing the program.*

Other students also found this program very helpful in guiding their future career path. While some have plans to pursue positions in clinical trials, others are planning to do a Master's degree with their practicum supervisor via another McGill Department. Thus, the Graduate Diploma in Oncology has not only provided students with a more in-depth knowledge in all things cancer, it also has exposed them to the range of possibilities for career direction and growth as well as providing invaluable connections in the field. A cancer training program at the Master's and PhD levels is currently under development at McGill and it will take into account the potential interest of students who have completed the Graduate Diploma in Oncology.

Reflecting on the inaugural year of the Graduate Diploma in Oncology it is important to acknowledge the people who helped make it a resounding success. These include: the Graduate Program Director, Koren Mann, the Graduate Program Coordinator, Elisa Monaco and the Student Affairs Officer for AEC-7, Stephanie Larocque; Course instructors for the newly launched ONCO courses, Marc Fabian, Eduardo Franco, Melissa Henry, John Kildea, Peter Nugus and Agnihotram Ramanakumar, as well as the many guest lecturers; Practicum supervisors, Joanne Alfieri, Jason Agulnik/Goulnar Kasymjanova, Mark Basik, Eduardo Franco, Melissa Henry, Andrea Laizner/John Kildea; Program committee members, Laurent Azoulay, Mark Basik, Khashayar Esfahani, Marc Fabian, Melissa Henry, John Kildea and Carmen Loiselle; and Gayle Shinder who played an instrumental role in the creation of the program and who served in an advisory capacity to the Graduate Program Director. On a final note, as Department Chair, Dr. Eduardo Franco has been committed to enriching the educational portfolio of the Gerald Bronfman Department of Oncology by including a Graduate Program. The development and implementation of the Graduate Diploma in Oncology and six new graduate courses would not have been possible without his vision and invaluable support.