Empowered Survivor: Developing an Online Platform for Oral Cancer Survivors with CINJ

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Introduction:
• The physicians and researchers of Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey (CINJ) have the mission to help individuals fight cancer
• Dr. Manne’s team at CINJ conduct various behavioral studies to help patients and survivors of cancer
• The Empowered Survivor Project aims to create an online platform for oral/oropharyngeal cancer survivors with modules that encourage survivorship self care and a community for encouragement

Objective of Internship
• To participate in behavioral research involving human participants and develop skills required for such work
• To learn about the major difficulties of oral/oropharyngeal cancer patients and the challenges survivors face

Work Profile
• Create resources for study participants in cases of elevated levels of distress during study participation
• Compile and Compare different national health surveys to help create a cancer catchment survey for the Big10 Schools
• Contact study participants via phone call for reminders to ensure study timeline runs smoothly

Reflections:
Calling Study Participants:
• I was able to develop communication skills as a researcher with study participants. I particularly learned how to approach conversations with oral cancer survivors who may not be comfortable with speech.
• Interacting with the study participants helped me reinforce my motivation for work, as I was reminded of how Empowered Survivor could help oral/oropharyngeal cancer survivors.

Becoming Familiar with Public Health Studies
• I became familiar with the different classifications of oral/oropharyngeal cancer causes and how race/ethnicity is reported in such studies
• Having previously worked in an oncology lab, it was interesting to see how population studies and public health approaches cancer to help patients/survivors

Personal Development
• Having multiple projects at once, I was also able to develop skills in time management and prioritization
• Having a log to reflect on my weekly experiences helped me understand what type of work I enjoy and how I work best
• Although the internship was virtual, all team members were efficient with communication and supportive

Looking ahead:
I am excited about the positive impact Empowered Survivor will bring to help oral/oropharyngeal cancer survivors and help improve their quality of life

Questions:
I am curious whether survivors of different race/ethnicity have different feedback for Empowered Survivor, and whether such different experiences can be addressed to improve the content of Empowered Survivor.

Conclusion:
Working with Dr. Manne and her team was a rewarding experience as I was able to address oral/oropharyngeal cancer from a public health standpoint and develop various soft skills to be used in behavioral research. I am thankful for having had this opportunity.

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