

How a Clinical Research Coordinator Helps Cancer Patients

Kami Pullakhandam is a clinical research coordinator at the UCSF Helen Diller Family Comprehensive Cancer Center's Breast Care Center.

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Can you describe your role?

A clinical research coordinator manages the patient's involvement and activities in clinical trials, such as those testing new treatments. We often serve as a bridge between the provider and the patient. For example, there's a lot of communication we do to make sure that patients are aware of their schedule and to schedule procedures in a way that doesn't significantly impact their quality of life or serve as a major hindrance to them.

How else do you help patients?

The level that a research coordinator is involved with a patient is often dependent on just how complex a trial is. With a trial that's very complicated, a clinical research coordinator can help to simplify things for a patient and serve as a very accessible resource for them. If the trial is for an investigational drug, a clinical research coordinator may help track patients' symptoms. We can help escalate any concerns patients may have and maybe get a faster or more detailed response from their clinical team. Even if I don't know the answer to a question, I'm always able to help direct patients to someone they can get their answer from.

Aside from accessing experimental treatments, why would a patient want to be part of a clinical trial?

I think that when patients are enrolled in a clinical trial, they get more monitoring than is the standard of care because there are more people involved in their care and watching out for them. That's something that is often overlooked when patients are considering enrolling in clinical trials that I would say is a massive benefit to them. In general, of course, by participating in a trial, patients are able to contribute to a larger body of knowledge that benefits not only them but also future generations.

Can we talk about your meeting with First Lady Jill Biden last October?

In honor of Breast Cancer Awareness Month, Jill Biden came to visit to better understand UCSF [University of California, San Francisco] initiatives surrounding breast cancer. My time with her was spent speaking about the future of breast cancer. I was able to share with her my motivations for pursuing the job that I'm in now as well as my future goal of becoming an oncologist. And we were able to speak a little bit about research at UCSF and how that's crucial to the future of breast cancer care. It was a very special moment to be able to meet her and share all the hard work that we've been doing.

What inspires you in your work?

One of the most fulfilling aspects of my job is first meeting a patient, taking the time to recognize where all of their worries lie and then working to address all of those concerns and really provide a comforting atmosphere. After several months, a lot of my patients have expressed a greater confidence in themselves to be able to tackle the challenge ahead of them, which is their breast cancer diagnosis. I think it's really fulfilling to be a part of that transformation.

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