

Special Issue in Honor of J. Randall Curtis, MD, MPH

What Does it Mean to be an Excellent Mentor? J. Randall “Randy” Curtis’ Living Legacy



Cara L. McDermott, PhD, PharmD, Heather Coats, PhD, APRN-BC, Gwen M. Bernacki, MD, MHSA, Erin Abu-Rish Blakeney, PhD, RN, Crystal E. Brown, MD, MA, Nancy Lau, PhD, Robert Y. Lee, MD, MS, Matthew E. Modes, MD, MPP, MS, Angela Steineck, MD, MS, Jill M. Steiner, MD, MS, Mallory R. Taylor, MD, MS, and Erin K. Kross, MD
Cambia Palliative Care Center of Excellence, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, USA

Key Words

Palliative care, mentoring, legacy

Introduction

“Before my (ALS) diagnosis, I used to think of my legacy as the papers I had published and the impact that my research has had on the field of medicine. Since my diagnosis, my thinking has changed. I now see my legacy as the people I have mentored and helped mentor and the people that they have mentored. This vision of legacy gives me much more joy and happiness than my old vision of legacy.”—J. Randall Curtis, UW Medicine Huddle, December 6, 2021.¹

In this narrative essay, we, eleven graduates of the University of Washington’s T32 training program in palliative care and/or K12 program in implementation science² and Co-Director of the Cambia Palliative Care Center of Excellence (EKK), share our experiences as research mentees of Dr. Randy Curtis. This essay includes a composite of our reflective writing on what Randy’s mentorship has meant to us. To develop this piece, we each created our own individual narrative reflective essays, using Dr. Curtis’ recent interview on the GeriPal podcast as a prompt, and framework.³ Then, we compiled brief excerpts, and used multiple methods (see Fig. 1) to display our shared thoughts in honor of our mentor. Our hope is you will see the enduring legacy his mentorship has provided us—a gift for which we will always be grateful.

Focusing on What is Most Important

It turns out that Randy is the mentor I didn’t know I needed. People often talk about the hidden curriculum—lessons that, for better or worse, are learned but

not always intended. . . . I think Randy’s hidden curriculum was how to live a good life as a health researcher. Since his diagnosis it has become much more explicit, creating space for me and other mentees to reflect on what is most important for us and to make plans to focus more on those things in all areas of our lives (EB).

As I listened to Randy’s words during the interview, I hear the deep wisdom and focus that make Randy such an exceptional mentor and person. His unwavering commitment to his mentees: even faced with his own mortality, supporting his mentees is a top priority. His determination to focus on what’s important and put everything else aside: this goes for research and your non-work life. And, to truly support and lift up those you mentor, you need to really listen, facilitate reflection, and manage expectations (MRT).

Commitment to Mentees

Randy became my mentor when I was a bit adrift, having decided to change my research focus, and move beyond a previous mentoring relationship. He cared about me as a person, understood my needs and values, and steered me towards practical, fundable ideas while sponsoring me for multiple awards. His support buoyed me during a difficult time and helped me understand my best path forward, aligned with my goals, values, and interests. He centered my needs and validated my experiences, which was vital to my success (CLM).

The work is about the people, and I’ve always felt that Randy genuinely cares about me as a mentee and

Address correspondence to: Cara L. McDermott, PhD, PharmD, Cambia Palliative Care Center of Excellence, University of Washington, 325 Ninth Ave, Box 359762, Seattle, WA 98104, USA. E-mail: clm2@uw.edu

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they face, and identifying ways for them to move forward in alignment with those goals. As someone who has worked with Randy as both a research mentee and a clinician trainee, he has truly remarkable skills in both arenas... Randy's voice has always been the "home button" that brings focus to the discussion, identifies the goals and values that unite us, and finds pragmatic strategies for moving forward. I admire how Randy has identified LISTENING as the key to the clarity his voice always seems to bring—in his patient care, in his research, and in his mentorship. I will miss his voice (RYL).

Final Thoughts

Anyone who is lucky enough to count themselves a mentee of Randy Curtis' is undeniably better for it. I am so grateful to have the opportunity to learn from this remarkable person (MRT).

I am and will be forever grateful for the opportunity to be one of Randy's mentees—it has changed my life and work for the better (EB).

I consider myself and the palliative care community to be so incredibly blessed to have such a thoughtful, generous, giving human being as a leader, investigator, and mentor (RYL).

Whether it be family or our research teams, our relationships become our strongest legacy. I thank Randy for welcoming me into his palliative care research community. His community and wisdom are gifts I will cherish throughout my career and life (AS).

Notes:

¹Available at <http://huddle.uwmedicine.org/randy-curtis-palliative-care-perspective>. Last accessed January 3,

2021.

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³Living with and studying serious illness: Podcast with Randy Curtis. Available at <http://geripal.org/living-with-and-studying-serious-illness-podcast-with-randy-curtis>. Last accessed December 20, 2021. Funding for the GeriPal podcast is provided by Archstone Foundation.

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