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The Pitfalls of Career Advancement for the Clinical Trialist: A Decanal Perspective

Allen S. Lichter, MD
Chief Executive Officer
American Society of Clinical Oncology



I comment on this topic from the perspective of:

1. A clinical researcher who spent many years in the co-operative group system.
2. A former medical school Dean (1998-2006 Univ. of Michigan).
3. A long-time ASCO volunteer and now ASCO CEO.

My Conclusion:

Working in the oncology clinical co-operative groups is frequently not well rewarded by academic recognition and advancement.

Why is this so?

The work is:

- Mysterious to promotions committees
- Undervalued by promotions committees
- Non- “independent”
- Often underfunded
- Takes too long

The Work is Mysterious

- No other specialty has clinical research infrastructure akin to oncology.
- Work is done off-site in collaboration with people unknown to the committee.
- Belief that most clinical trials are performed by industry.

The Work is Undervalued

- No sense of intellectual rigor that goes into trial design and protocol execution.
- No sense of the intense time commitment.
- No sense of the critical role these studies play in advancing the field.

The Work is Not “Independent”

- We say we value team science, and cooperative group trials require a huge team.
- Yet promotion committees constantly ask about a faculty member’s independence as a researcher.
- If you are not a first or last author on the paper, your very important contributions can easily be ignored.

The Work is Often Unfunded

- A great deal of effort is given away.
- Grant funding in the name of the investigator is either lacking or is as a co-investigator.
- Division Directors and Department Chairs are clamping down on uncompensated time.

The Work Takes Too Long

- From inception → to design → to approval → to activation → to accrual → to follow-up → to analysis → to presentation → to publication can take years.
- Tenure clocks are frequently incompatible with a career in clinical research.

What Can We Do?



1. Co-operative group leadership should write Division Directors/Department Chairs to summarize: faculty contributions:
 - Role in the group
 - Accomplishments
 - Impact
2. Funding agencies should emphasize the important contributions made by clinical trialists, even when their work is funded indirectly. Create a nomenclature and publicize it.

What Can We Do?

3. Tenure should be available to clinical researchers in oncology and the tenure clock modified to accommodate the nature of this research.
4. Faculty need to use an annotated bibliography to explain their work to those who are unfamiliar.

Conclusion

Working in the oncology clinical co-operative groups is frequently not well rewarded by academic recognition and advancement.

But, it should be. With effort and care on our part it can be.