



TRAINING IN ONCOLOGIC ASPECTS of Gastroenterology and Endoscopy at MD Anderson Cancer Center, Houston, Texas

Irina M. Cazacu, MD, ACG International Training Grant Recipient

RECEIVING THE ACG GRANT AND TRAINING AT MD ANDERSON CANCER CENTER was, for me, a dream come true. I was honored to have the opportunity to train and perform research under the mentorship of the renowned gastroenterology expert, Dr. Manoop S. Bhutani, who has offered incredible support throughout the process of my application and during my fellowship.

I received my medical degree from the University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Craiova, Romania four years ago. There is a significant cancer burden in Romania and an acute need for oncologists, so I decided to begin

my training in medical oncology to fight against one of the world's most dreaded diseases. My plan is to develop a clinical and research career with a focus on oncologic aspects of gastroenterology.

With this goal in mind, I started my PhD studies with an emphasis on molecular profile and early detection of pancreatic cancer. I am fortunate to have an outstanding mentor, Dr. Adrian Saftoiu, who shared with me his continuous excitement of practicing in the field and all the challenges faced during attempts to improve the diagnosis of gastrointestinal cancers. He encouraged me to apply for the ACG International Travel Grant that would offer me the chance to train

abroad and acquire clinical and research experience from a leading cancer center in the United States.

FINDING A "SECOND HOME" AT MD ANDERSON

Houston and MD Anderson became my second home very quickly. I was pleasantly surprised with the philosophy of this prestigious institution, with its focus on excellence, respect, and value of diversity. I came to understand the pure dedication this institution has toward patients with cancer, and it really dawned on me that the simplest things can make a huge difference in the lives of our patients.

During my training at MD Anderson, I was exposed to a wide variety of complex oncological cases and gained experience from the high-volume of patients I saw. I shadowed and observed various complex endoscopic procedures performed by Dr. Bhutani in cancer patients, enriching my medical knowledge by understanding the indications, findings and clinical implications for each case.

Dr. Bhutani is part of the multidisciplinary expert panel who developed the pancreatic cancer screening algorithm. As part of his team, I was involved in research projects regarding pancreatic cancer screening and this experience offered me a better understanding of this concept, from clinical benefits to psychological impact.

LEARNING FROM MULTIDISCIPLINARY TUMOR BOARDS

I attended various multidisciplinary tumor boards related to gastrointestinal cancers, where I gained first-hand knowledge from experts in the field. At the moment in Romania, there are only vague recommendations for the use of multidisciplinary teams. At MD Anderson, I became familiar with the principles and practice of multidisciplinary teams and my plan is to promote interdisciplinary interactions that will facilitate effective teamwork at my home institution. I had also the chance to attend various educational sessions, teaching rounds, journal clubs, and lectures from world-class faculty. I grew so much as a doctor in this past year due to the sheer number of opportunities afforded to me.

A TURNING POINT IN MY RESEARCH CAREER

My training at MD Anderson under the mentorship of Dr. Bhutani was a turning point in my research career. I was placed in a stimulating environment with an outstanding team who facilitated my scientific training and productivity. I was able to extend the output of my research papers by a considerable amount, both in qualitative and in quantitative terms. I participated in several research projects, from study design, Institutional Review Board submission, data collection, data analysis, to drafting of the manuscripts. My work resulted in six manuscripts accepted for publication and two presentations at international meetings, DDW 2018 and ACG's Annual Scientific Meeting in 2018.

EUS-guided fiducial markers placement for image-guided radiotherapy in gastrointestinal malignancies was another area of research during my training at MD Anderson. We have conducted a meta-analysis showing that EUS-guided placement of fiducial markers is safe and has a high rate of technical success. Furthermore, I was part of the ongoing research projects looking at the clinical and survival benefits of fiducial markers in patients with pancreatic cancer. I had also the



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incredible opportunity to observe new treatment modalities for pancreatic cancer that are under research at MD Anderson and are likely to change the clinical practice in the future.

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

My dream and future career plan is to be actively involved not only in the treatment of gastrointestinal cancers but also in the diagnosis of these devastating diseases by training in interventional gastroenterology. I plan to become a pioneer of the pancreatic cancer screening program in Romania upon my return.

Being part of Dr. Bhutani's team was a tremendous experience which will inspire and encourage me as a person and as an oncologist/interventional gastroenterologist for the rest of my professional career to achieve and to provide the best possible care for my patients. Dr. Bhutani was not only my mentor but also my biggest career advocate. I am very grateful to the ACG for providing me with an awesome learning experience that is invaluable to me and the patients I will care for. Without question, training at MD Anderson Cancer Center under the mentorship of Dr. Manoop Bhutani was a wonderful, life-changing experience that I will carry with pride and honor for the rest of my medical career.