

### *Conversation With...*

## **DONNA M. POWELL, DHSC, CMD, RT(T)**

Manager

Cancer Center Alliance, Philadelphia, PA

Years in field: 39 years in radiation therapy  
(12.5 of these years as a medical dosimetrist)

#### **What was your individual career path in terms of education/training, entry-level job, or other significant opportunity?**

I was exposed to the career path of radiation therapy/medical dosimetry when I was a high school senior. I was fortunate that my mother was a nurse at a cancer hospital in Philadelphia. My mom asked me to meet her there for lunch. It was at that lunch my mother introduced me to her friend. At that time, I was thinking about registering for x-ray school. Her friend asked me if I ever considered radiation therapy as a career path, which I had never heard of at the time. She took me down to the department and gave me a guided tour. I quickly found out that she happened to be the department dosimetrist, which looking back, seems to be a bit of foreshadowing for me. It was an incredible opportunity, and I decided that radiation therapy/medical dosimetry would be the path I would take. I graduated with my Associate Degree in Applied Science, Radiation Therapy, in 1985.

I spent the first half of my career as a radiation therapist, traversing the roles of a staff therapist, senior staff therapist, clinical coordinator, and department manager. It was at that time that our dosimetrist left the position. I needed to fill the vacancy. I was trained "on-the-job" by my medical physicist. Ultimately, he asked me to remain in the dosimetry position. I passed my medical dosimetry boards in 2004.

Over the remaining years, I have worked as a medical dosimetrist, medical dosimetry/radiation therapy program director, and oncology scientist and manager for radiation therapy & medical imaging programs.

Throughout my career, I have earned my Bachelor's Degree in Health Sciences, Master's Degree in Radiologic & Imaging Sciences, and Doctoral Degree in Health Science.

#### **What are the most important skills and/or qualities for someone in your profession?**

I feel there are many qualifications that are essential for working in the medical dosimetry profession. Essential character traits may include: attention to detail, professionalism, clear communication, being a team player, being open to criticism, and flexibility with workload.

In my current position, all the skills required for a clinical medical dosimetrist are also required for my daily work.

**What do you wish you had known going into this profession?**

I wish I had known the level of impact this position provides to patients and their families. Initially, I thought this was a “behind the scenes” job, but I quickly learned how deeply my work impacted patients. I had the opportunity to be invited into examination rooms to see patients at the time of their follow-up visits. I was provided an opportunity to see that the treatment plans I helped create could eliminate skin reactions and allow patients to continue on with their daily routines without additional issues.

**Are there many job opportunities in your profession? In what specific areas?**

There is an overall shortage of medical dosimetrists employed in the clinical arena; however, there are some jobs available if the candidates are willing to relocate.

Additionally, in the next 5-10 years, many medical dosimetrists will be nearing retirement age, which will create a greater void in the available dosimetrists for the clinical and educational environments.

**How do you see your profession changing in the next five years, how will technology shift, and what skills will be required?**

I see more use of digitized information and technology being to identify the best treatment options for patients. The technology will become more advanced, and additional educational training will be required. Radiation therapy and medical dosimetry are ever-evolving fields. The need for flexibility, and acceptance of change, need to be highlighted.

**What do you enjoy most about your job? What do you enjoy least about your job?**

I love the fact that in my current role, we are informing and educating the public with the most up-to-date advances in cancer care based on evidence-based, consensus-driven medicine. We are making a difference in the lives of patients who are navigating the cancer journey, and the members of our organization are committed to improving patients' lives by providing accessible, and high-quality care for all patients.

My least favorite part of this position is that I no longer have an opportunity to interact with patients the way I did when I worked in clinical practice.

**Can you suggest a valuable “try this” for students considering a career in your profession?**

I believe that students would greatly benefit from shadowing a medical dosimetrist for half a day. This experience will give them the chance to determine if this career aligns with their interests and goals.