I joined the infusion suite of an UPHS outpatient oncology center in Philadelphia this summer as a temporary member of its health care system. The project centered on patients with solid tumors or multiple myeloma and their experiences with cancer related pain, as well as the experiences of their family members or personal caregivers. The goal of my position was to recruit, interview, and encourage participation in a further in-depth interview with the principal investigator of the project.

It was a two step process: first, I would conduct several free-listing (free-association) exercises and record the results; second, the principal investigator would address the results in a focus group or interview setting with the participant. The purpose of the two step process was to determine what are the most salient concerns regarding pain in different populations. We looked at patients with different racial backgrounds, as well their family members or personal caregivers. With the data collected from the interviews, we would develop interventions to address these concerns.

In two and a half months, I had to reestablish myself in a new ecosystem. I knew that the nurses in the infusion suite ran the show and would be the key to my success, so I learned all of their names and started developing positive relationships with them. It is difficult to be an extraneous part thrust into a system that works so well without you. I learned how to start fresh in an unknown environment and I believe that is invaluable.

In two and a half months, I learned that research is frustrating. There were so many nights when I dreamt of how few patients I was recruiting and the quality of the interviews I was conducting and IRB approval and sending follow-up emails. I questioned my value as a researcher each day as I waved goodbye to Naomi at the front desk. This summer, I have developed the belief that most things truly valuable have been anticipated, awaited, and earned.
In the infusion suite where I had established myself, I found myself saying goodbye to my favorite patient. They say you can’t have favorites, but the reality is that you do. As I sat talking with him that final day of treatment about the election and history and life, the realization set in that we would not meet again after he left. He told me that I was doing important work, that projects like these push us into the future, and most importantly that everything would be okay.

Because the project itself was so small, I was able to become immersed in every aspect of it. I wasn’t just doing one job in the grand scheme of things, but rather I was doing a little bit of all of them. As someone who had never participated in a research project, I am so glad that my PURM project allowed me to touch so many facets of process.