

**In Memoriam:
Dawn Tranchino
Provenzale, MD,
MS (August 18,
1955–April 20, 2021)**



Dawn Tranchino Provenzale, MD, MS

Many could write a loving tribute to Dr Dawn Tranchino Provenzale. Indeed, the joy of her work and the foundation of her legacy were her lasting relationships as mentor, colleague, and friend. Although it is impossible to include input from everyone who knew Dawn well, we wish to provide tribute by weaving together the story of her life through the experiences and voices of some of the people whose lives she touched. This tribute goes beyond her curriculum vitae that has been summarized so well in other similar pieces, including from the Duke School of Medicine.¹ Rather, we reflect on lessons Dawn taught us and ways she impacted our lives.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1955, Dawn Tranchino was the first of her immediate family to attend college, enrolling at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, in 1973. While completing her undergraduate degree, she realized she wanted to pursue a career in health care. Attending the Cornell University–New York Hospital School of Nursing, Dawn graduated in 1978 with induction into the Sigma Theta Tau International Honor Society of Nursing. Her first position was in the New York Hospital emergency department. Among many family memories, a favorite was a time a patient was waving

a knife in the emergency department. Dawn carefully approached the patient and matter-of-factly said, “Give me that,” and took the knife away. This anecdote exemplifies her no-nonsense approach to any and all challenges.

Although she enjoyed her nursing role, Dawn would later acknowledge that the lack of female professional role models contributed to a delay in her considering a career as a physician. She recounted a conversation with a male resident who told her, “One doesn’t need to be extremely smart to become a physician; it just takes hard work.” Because Dawn was both smart and hardworking, she tenaciously pursued her goal of becoming a physician. She completed premedical requirements and then excelled at Albany Medical College where she was inducted into Alpha Omega Alpha and met her husband, Dr James (Jim) Provenzale. They completed their residencies at the University of North Carolina where Dawn expressed an interest in gastroenterology (GI) research. While only a resident, Dawn’s work on a project about risk stratification in GI bleeding led to her first publication—not surprisingly as first author.² This publication preceded the Rockall GI bleeding risk score by more than a decade. Another of her resident projects led to a first authored paper in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*.³ Dr Robert Sandler recalled, “Dawn always completed what she started.” After residency, Dawn and her husband moved to Boston where Dawn completed fellowships in both GI and clinical decision making at New England Medical Center. The combination of training in these 2 areas would provide the foundation for her scholarly work that would advance GI. Indeed, Dawn created unique research opportunities by integrating multidisciplinary approaches to solve complex problems, a skill she encouraged in many of her mentees.

Trailblazer in GI Outcomes Research

In the early 1990s, the field of health services research was just beginning to emerge in GI. Dr Ian Taylor, then Chief of the Duke GI

Division, recruited Dawn to establish a health services research training program. Dr Taylor commented that, “She was not only brilliant, but was also a wonderful human being. Dawn added a unique dimension to Duke’s GI Division, bringing her special expertise in a field that benefited us all.” Soon after her arrival in Durham, a position became available on the general medicine health services training grant. Dawn proposed recruitment of a gastroenterologist for the position—essentially launching her Duke GI research training program.

A remarkably giving woman, Dawn established life-long bonds with young investigators to assist them in achieving their goals. Reflecting on more than 27 years of continuous mentorship from Dawn, Dr Jason Dominitz remarked that, “Dawn was clearly born to mentor as I had no clue I was her first fellow mentee until after she passed away. She never left me wanting and I cannot imagine a more skilled, dedicated, or supportive mentor. Dawn pushed and challenged me, always with my best interests at heart.” The success of Dawn’s training program soon attracted a stream of young investigators. With these and other investigators, Dawn published more than 150 peer-reviewed publications on GI health outcomes, clinical practice guidelines, cancer screening and surveillance, and quality of care. In her quest to advance GI care, her research program integrated observational research, patient-centered outcomes, genetic epidemiology, and cancer genomics.

Through her training in epidemiology and clinical decision-making, Dawn saw opportunities to improve the care of patients with robust data that would support clinical guidelines. She conducted early GI health-related quality of life studies and cost-effectiveness analyses. When the clinical question she wanted to address was not her area of expertise, she identified a colleague and invited collaboration. Dr Jane Onken recalled, “As a junior faculty member, I remember countless hours with Dawn and reams of computer paper as she ran Markov model after Markov model

IN MEMORIAM

in a cost-effectiveness analysis for ulcerative colitis surveillance strategies.” Dawn’s personal research focused on efforts to improve colorectal cancer screening and surveillance. She recognized early the power of pairing long-term observational data with genetic information and biomarkers for risk stratification and a personalized approach to colorectal cancer screening. Through her research and national leadership positions, Dawn influenced the trajectory of research in the field, as exemplified below.

Dawn met Dr David Lieberman when she was completing her training in 1992. Dr Lieberman recalls her enthusiasm, diligence, and rigor—instantly recognizing her to be a star. He invited her to join the VA Cooperative Study #380 planning committee, a study in which asymptomatic veterans underwent screening colonoscopy. One of the primary aims was to identify risk factors for advanced neoplasia, hoping to determine which individuals were most likely to benefit from screening. Someone with a strong background in epidemiology was needed. Dr Lieberman noted that inviting Dawn to join the study was one of the best decisions he ever made. Dawn played a key role in the initial analyses, and in the transfer of all study and biospecimen data to Durham, North Carolina, to perform continuing secondary analyses. Dr Lieberman reflected that,

Over this time we became good friends, and I saw her flourish as a mentor to so many. One of her qualities which I so admired and respected is that she would never give up. When dealing with the Veterans Administration (VA), she managed to present cogent arguments for funding, and invariably got what she asked for. I always maintained that VA leadership was simply blown away by her logic, enthusiasm, and persistence, and knew that she would never give up on a good idea. What I have always treasured about Dawn is this remarkable ‘can-do’ spirit, which permeated every aspect of her life.

Dawn was particularly gifted at recognizing and seizing opportunities. For example, when the National Cancer Institute sponsored a cancer outcomes study (CanCORS) based in several population-based registries, Dawn immediately recognized the prospect of offering the same program to veterans. She convinced the VA to provide funding, and in so doing, the CanCORS team of investigators benefitted from Dawn’s expertise and passion and veterans benefitted from cutting edge research. She also recognized the value in developing a biorepository for the CONFIRM study (co-chaired by her mentees Drs Jason Dominitz and Doug Robertson), a separate large comparative-effectiveness study of colonoscopy versus fecal immunochemical testing. As a member of the executive committee for CONFIRM, Dawn was a vocal proponent for obtaining blood specimens from study participants to allow linkage of genetic and serum factors to colorectal neoplasia outcomes. Funding for blood collection was not planned at the study’s inception, so the idea met considerable resistance. But Dawn was tenacious, lobbying the VA leadership and the National Cancer Institute that the resulting resource would be unique and valuable. Dawn was resolute in her quest for funding and ultimately prevailed. There was no drama, just the facts. As the director of an evidence-based center, Dawn always knew the facts would eventually win out. She never quit until they did.

As Director of the VA Cooperative Studies Program Epidemiology Center (CSPEC) in Durham, North Carolina, Dawn always kept its mission front and center, asking, “How will this help our veterans?” She addressed this mission by developing publicly available research data, biorepository studies, and applying research results to health policy. Dawn also asked, “How can we get younger researchers involved?”, aligning studies with the career interests of each researcher. She brought meaning to the full spectrum of her research activities because of her focus on impact and maintaining high quality. For her research excellence, Dawn was recognized as an American Gastroenterological

Association (AGA) Foundation’s 2008 Outstanding AGA Woman in Science.

Exceptional Mentorship

In recognition of decades of work inspiring multidisciplinary colleagues to pursue research, Dawn received the 2014 AGA Institute Council Clinical Practice Section Research Mentor Award. Dawn generously mentored more than forty students, residents, fellows, and faculty. As Dr Jason Dominitz noted, “What truly impressed me about Dawn was her absolute selflessness in her support of her mentees.” George Jackson, PhD, echoed that sentiment, recalling: “As a world class researcher, clinician, and administrator/leader, Dawn frequently said she was most proud of the many accomplishments of (her) trainees.” Through her efforts, Dawn inspired >20 mentees to become academic researchers, with many attaining full professor, GI division chief, and department of medicine chair positions, global recognition, and ongoing GI research grant support.

Actively building a diverse national research community, Dawn enthusiastically supported women, underrepresented minorities, international colleagues, and men pursuing research across many disciplines. She had a profound impact on the lives she touched, stretching far beyond her lifetime of success in GI research. With the same passion she devoted to research, Dawn strove to change the way we work—to enable all those interested in research to have the support, time, and attention needed to achieve success. Dawn approached mentorship with the same rigor she dedicated to her research. With a detailed organizational plan, she came to all mentoring meetings fully prepared (Gantt charts still make many of her mentees smile and think of her). Although Dawn had high expectations of mentees, she was also a dedicated listener, and this quality enabled her to focus on the individual goals and needs of each mentee. Indeed, the foundation of a mentoring relationship with Dawn developed through a series of conversations to help her to understand the background, values, and goals of each

mentee. In so doing, Dawn forged a personal and lasting connection with each mentee. As many of her mentees attest, regular check-ins (in person, by phone, or later by video) to review both recent accomplishments and failures were mandatory and inviolable. When the mentee identified struggles, there would be an honest, open discussion about next steps, often with practical suggestions from Dawn to overcome the roadblock. Part of Dawn's lasting legacy is the resilience she instilled in her mentees, teaching them that failures are opportunities to grow and learn. Her unwavering optimism helped many mentees through the inevitable challenges encountered in research. Even the conclusion of a career development award did not necessarily mean the end of the mentorship arrangement, as scheduled calls with follow-up planning could persist for months or years. Naturally, the mentorship and type of advice would evolve over time, but the commitment to help, support, and improve the work (and even life) of the mentee never waned.

As an early female GI leader, Dawn was also an unwavering supporter of women faculty and trainees in GI, taking this passion to the national level through the AGA. She was in her element at the AGA Women's Luncheons, celebrating the achievements of women in GI. Upon her passing, Dr Deborah Fisher recalled one of the lessons imparted by Dawn: "Be transparent, up front, and inclusive in project teams and authorship." Dr Shahnaz Sultan reflected that Dawn taught her "to take on challenges and think big." Dawn encouraged Dr Sultan to keep an "IDEA book" that she maintains to this day. She taught that hard work does eventually pay off, but that it is important to value the work and not just the outcome. Dr Sultan recalled Dawn "taught the importance of maintaining integrity and being authentic...she taught how to be persistent and persuasive without being forceful... and most importantly, she taught the meaning of resilience." Dr Sultan remembered talking to Dawn when an opportunity to move from Florida to Minnesota arose. Expressing concern over how

difficult the transition would be, moving with 3 young kids, worried about the cold winters, Dawn's practical response was, "You know what you need to do? Just buy a coat." To this day, when Dr Sultan finds herself working through a difficult decision, she often finds herself asking "What would Dawn say?"

Seeing the benefits of her support, Dawn led national AGA efforts over several years as the Course Director of the AGA Academic Skills Workshop, Chair of the AGA Women's Committee, and Chair of the AGA Women's Leadership Council. For more than a decade, she taught numerous AGA Academic Skills Workshops (eg, "Building Your Research Team," "The Mentor/Mentee Relationship in a Clinical Research Career," "Grant Preparation and Review") and published "A guide for success as a clinical investigator."⁴ Dawn also established the Duke GI Division Women's Committee to share guidance and broadly discuss leadership, maternity/leave policies, and promotion/tenure strategies. Some of her last activities in the Duke GI Division were developing a local mentoring curriculum, always reminding the committee to assess the dynamic needs of the faculty and fellows and respond to those needs. She was a mentor's mentor. Dr Katherine Garman recalls that, "Dawn embodied the belief that mentors need support for the hard work of mentorship and in nurturing future generations of mentors. She reminded us of the value of the intangible and essential benefits derived from strong mentoring. Through her warm, engaged, optimistic style, Dawn demonstrated that we are stronger as a GI community when we champion and encourage each other."

Dawn was an exceptionally talented researcher and mentor who skillfully built the AGA and VA infrastructure to ensure the highest quality research. As a national GI leader, Dawn advanced GI clinical care, multidisciplinary teamwork, and fostered a highly collaborative VA research community. As an outstanding mentor and generous collaborator, Dawn was a rare treasure—she graciously spent time with students with mere glimmers of

research ideas, supported residents and fellows in their first research efforts, and continued to provide invaluable input and support to funded investigators she mentored throughout her career. Her generosity and selflessness are the traits she felt were her greatest contributions to her mentees. Dawn was an inspiring role model for us all and leaves an indelible legacy for the lives she touched and the work she accomplished. It is our fervent hope we will be able to follow her example in our interactions with trainees and colleagues, "paying it forward" to honor her memory.

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IN MEMORIAM

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