

Changing Outcomes Through Access

Gilead Winn CDA scholar – oncologist Keri Maher, DO – is making clinical trials accessible to more communities – and saving more lives.

Gilead-funded Winn CDA scholar, Keri Maher, D.O., at VCU Massey Comprehensive Cancer Center, is dedicated to helping patients with acute leukemias access lifesaving clinical trials. She explains that bone marrow transplants can be curative but are often out of reach due to a wide range of issues. “Donor availability is one obvious problem, but then there’s insurance, caregiver and childcare support, psychosocial support, transportation issues — all of these things are just challenges for many people and it’s just heartbreaking,” she said.

METHODICALLY TACKLING HEALTHCARE CHALLENGES

Through the Winn CDA, Dr. Maher has gained tools to design clinical trials that reduce these barriers. She is developing childcare support for parents in treatment, building networks of physicians to reach rural areas, and identifying therapies for patients unable to undergo transplants.

“Metrics do not explain the breadth and depth of change the Winn program creates,” she said. **“By intent, this program trains us to think in a different way, and to methodically tackle health care challenges in a multi-modal team-based approach that includes the communities themselves.”**



Gilead Winn CDA scholar, **Dr. Keri Maher**, with her patient.



Gilead Winn CDA scholar, **Dr. Keri Maher**, with her patient and clinical trial participant, **Mary Simmons**.

FROM “LESS THAN TWO WEEKS TO LIVE” TO CANCER FREE

In 2022, Mary Simmons was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia. At the first local hospital where she was diagnosed, doctors told her that she had less than two weeks to live. Refusing to accept that, she sought a second opinion at VCU Massey, where she met Dr. Maher.

Dr. Maher walked Simmons through the option of a clinical trial, explaining each step of the difficult process. Simmons agreed without hesitation. **“I said yes because at that point I was at ground zero with everything,” she recalled. “So this was my life turning point for me, getting on the clinical trial.”**

Three years later, Simmons is cancer free. She now volunteers her time advocating for patients to ask about clinical trials and gather all their options. “Letting people know about clinical trials, that they work, it’s a lifesaver,” she said.

Simmons’ and Maher’s story is an important reminder that, in addition to maximum generalizability of scientific results, the Winn Awards mission of **Better Science For All** also means hope for patients who have run out of options. When the standard of care has been exhausted, trials can truly make the difference between life and death.



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