

## Chemistry Ace Finds Her Calling

Choosing a career in pharmacy was easy for Dr. Susannah Koontz, who aced chemistry in high school. Her interest in oncology pharmacy was influenced by seeing both her parents develop cancer.

“It was during my two-year residency at the University of Kentucky that I first met children with cancer ... and I knew I’d found my calling,” Dr. Koontz says.

She earned her doctor of pharmacy degree at the University of Michigan and completed a residency at the University of Kentucky before joining M. D. Anderson in 1998 as a clinical pharmacist specializing in pediatric hematology and oncology.

“M. D. Anderson is an incredible place. I love being a part of the multidisciplinary team that is making such a difference for kids with cancer,” she says.

Dr. Koontz rounds daily with the physicians and nurses caring for pediatric inpatients, who are quite ill and need microscopic monitoring. Many have leukemia, bone cancer, brain tumors and assorted rare malignancies. Youngsters undergoing blood and marrow transplants are especially challenging.

“The littlest kids cannot take large volumes of intravenous medications, and most have a hard time swallowing oral drugs. Chemotherapeutic agents are very potent and often cause side effects,” says Dr. Koontz, who had provided pharmacy support for children from a few hours after birth through late teens.

She spends a lot of time talking with patients and their parents.

“I give all the kids, their parents and siblings some tips right up front on how to minimize the side effects. For teenagers, knowing that steroids can cause acne or how they can deal with peer pressure when they’ve lost their hair or a limb is a big part of my job,” Dr. Koontz notes.

There frequently are not many drugs available for pediatric patients and few alternatives when a first-choice medication is ordered by physicians. That’s why Dr.

Koontz was pleased when Lawrence A. Trissel's laboratory (see sidebar, pg. 16) demonstrated recently that an anti-viral drug available in tablet form for adults could be crushed in a slightly sweet syrupy solution and given to children.

One big misconception is that children should get low doses of many drugs when, in fact, Dr. Koontz says they often metabolize drugs faster and better than adults do.

Even on a difficult day, though, Dr. Koontz wouldn't trade places with anyone. "There are so many wonderful rewards from helping these fantastic kids," she stresses, adding that she "always enjoys" being a volunteer counselor at M. D. Anderson's Camp Star Trails, a summer camp for patients ages five to 12 and their siblings.

Mary Jane Schier. "Chemistry Ace Finds Her Calling" (pp. 14-15) excerpted from "Innovations in Pharmacy" in *Conquest*, Summer 2002, 17(1):10-17.