

profile

# The Art of Discipline

By Kelli Miller Stacy, ELS, Contributing Writer

Lillian Tom, B.S., R.T.(T), likes to give people a fighting chance. She's made a career of helping people battle a powerful opponent: cancer. For more than 16 years, the Queens, N.Y., native has worked in the radiation therapy department at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, where she helps treat a variety of cancers and benign tumors.

"I chose radiation therapy for the rewards. You're trying to help people get better," said Ms. Tom.

Growing up, Ms. Tom never dreamed of a career in the radiologic sciences, but the self-proclaimed science and math buff knew she wanted to use her talents in a health care setting.

"I had no idea what radiation therapy was when I was a kid," she said. "I had no idea what cancer was, except that people died from it. I only knew I wanted to pursue a career in medicine."

Attendance at the Bronx High School of Science — and, specifically, an advanced biology class there — fueled her passion for medicine and her interest in anatomy and musculature. She originally planned to pursue medical school studies, but admitted she never got the hang of chemistry, which posed a problem because she needed to know the subject well for the Medical College Admission Test. When it came time to choose a career path, physical therapy was on her list of possible pursuits, along with occupational therapy and the radiologic sciences. After carefully considering her options (with the help of her sister and brother-in-law, who are physicians) and applying to several programs, she chose the School of Radiation Therapy at Memorial Sloan-Kettering.

"I chose the school because I believed it was the best," Ms. Tom said. The two-year, full-time program allowed her to spend half her time in classes and the other half in the clinic. "You get a very good idea by the end of the first year if this career path is really for you," she said.

Ms. Tom originally intended to pursue treatment planning because there was a lot of math involved, something she liked and was good at. But after a rotation through that discipline, she was surprised that she found it rather uninspiring. Radiation therapy, instead, captured her attention. She received her degree in 1991 and has been at the cancer center ever since. She is a senior radiation therapist and simulation technologist with access to state-of-the-art equipment, including a Picker AcQSim unit and two Varian simulators.

"I am a hands-on type person, which is why the simulator is the place for me. You get to use your brain, you get to maneuver things in your head and you get to help plan out a patient's



Lillian Tom at home and work in New York City.

Photo by Robin M. Rosenthal ©2007

treatment,” said Ms. Tom, whose job also includes training other therapists in the use and fabrication of immobilization devices and simulation techniques.

### “Hands-on” Personality

Ms. Tom’s extracurricular activities emphasize her “hands-on” personality and allow her initial interest in musculature to thrive. She’s a martial arts practitioner who holds a fourth-degree black belt in judo, karate and jujutsu and is close to achieving a fourth-degree black belt in aikido. The four disciplines make up the Japanese martial arts.

“The martial arts keep you in good shape,” said Ms. Tom. “Karate, if you put your all into it, is actually very aerobic. Judo is more like wrestling. Aikido is similar to judo, but is more flowing. Jujutsu is the mother of all arts — you can punch and kick — it’s kind of like a free-for-all.”

Her accomplishments in the martial arts are especially impressive when you discover that she didn’t start participating in them until after she received her radiation therapy degree.

“My siblings (two brothers and two sisters) and I always wanted to do martial arts growing up. However, it cost money. So we went to the library, took out books on the subject and learned the difference between all the disciplines,” she recalled with a bit of nostalgia in her voice. Bruce Lee movies weren’t in the family budget, she explained, “but my father loved the 1970s ‘Kung Fu’ television series starring David Carradine, so we watched that.”

Despite vigorous training and competition, the accomplished athlete has never been seriously hurt. She’s competed in each martial arts level to get ahead, but as soon as she received her black belt in judo, she changed course. She recently passed the exam to become a national judo referee and today spends much of her time making sure folks fight fairly in competitions.

“Refereeing puts you in the center of the action. You really feel the heat and the frustration of the players. You’re right there, but for the most part, you’re not in harm’s way.”

Steering clear of injury is important to Ms. Tom. She recalled returning to work after one competition and having someone ask her what happened to her neck, which was bruised after a neck lock. “One of my main concerns has been showing up at work with a black eye or mark around my neck and having to explain it to my patients.”

A competitor’s injury at a recent judo event prompted Ms. Tom to read

an ASRT Directed Reading focusing on CT scans. “I came across the article after a kid landed on his head, and said if I’m going to read it, I’m going to answer the questions [and get credit for passing]. The subject of CT scans for diagnostic purposes does not have anything to do with my job, but it directly relates to what I do when I referee,” she said.

### Up for a Challenge

Ms. Tom thrives on adventure and is certainly not one to sit still. In addition to her radiation therapy certification, she also holds a bachelor’s degree in psychology, which she received in 1992 from the State University of New York. She still remains keenly interested in musculature, and teaches a once-a-year class on CT cross-sectional anatomy at Sloan-Kettering, despite a slight sense of stage fright.

“I get so nervous when I start the lecture, but when we get to the part where I start showing the films, I’m in my element,” she said.

When she’s not at work or refereeing, she enjoys coin collecting and reading “anything I can get my hands on,” as well as biking, softball, weight training and skiing. In fact, during a recent ski trip to Canada, work called with an unusual request.

“They asked me how to bolus an eye socket. I told them to get a sheath from the intravaginal radiation supply area, place it in the patient’s eye and inject it with water. That was the extent of my Canadian consult,” she said.

She said the more unusual the cancer or body part, the bigger and better the challenge is for her. “My favorite part of my job is coming across something really unusual and having to take care of it,” she explained. “That’s the best thing about working at Sloan-Kettering. You get to see all the special cases. I get to see things that are unique and provide a big challenge. That is what makes my job interesting.” ♦



Photos by Robin M. Rosenthal ©2007.

A lifelong martial arts enthusiast, Ms. Tom is a national judo referee. “Refereeing puts you in the center of the action,” she says.



Continued from Page 13

and accountability. RAs can provide that by serving as a point of contact for referring physicians and their staff, answering questions about patient preparation and follow up. RAs also must be accountable for the care they provide through strict credentialing. Finally, ancillary staff look to RAs to act as mentors, educators and a bridge between themselves and radiologists.

Ms. Brenkendorff said that each individual RA must look for ways to improve his or her own performance because “we are the leaders and groundbreakers in this profession.”

While the RA profession is still a work in progress, practitioners already are working in many states and making valued contributions to the health care team. Lucina Mallavarapu, M.S., R.R.A., R.T.(R), spoke at the symposium on the role of RAs in abdominal imaging. Ms. Mallavarapu discussed the wide variety of abdominal examinations and procedures she performs, ranging from esophagrams and barium swallows to urethrography, hysterosalpingograms and paracentesis, as well as the diseases and conditions she’s looking for.

Ms. Renner noted that every RA’s practice is different. Some have diverse responsibilities within their clinical setting and perform a variety of imaging exams, line placements and centesis. Others are more focused in one particular area, such as vascular-interventional radiology.

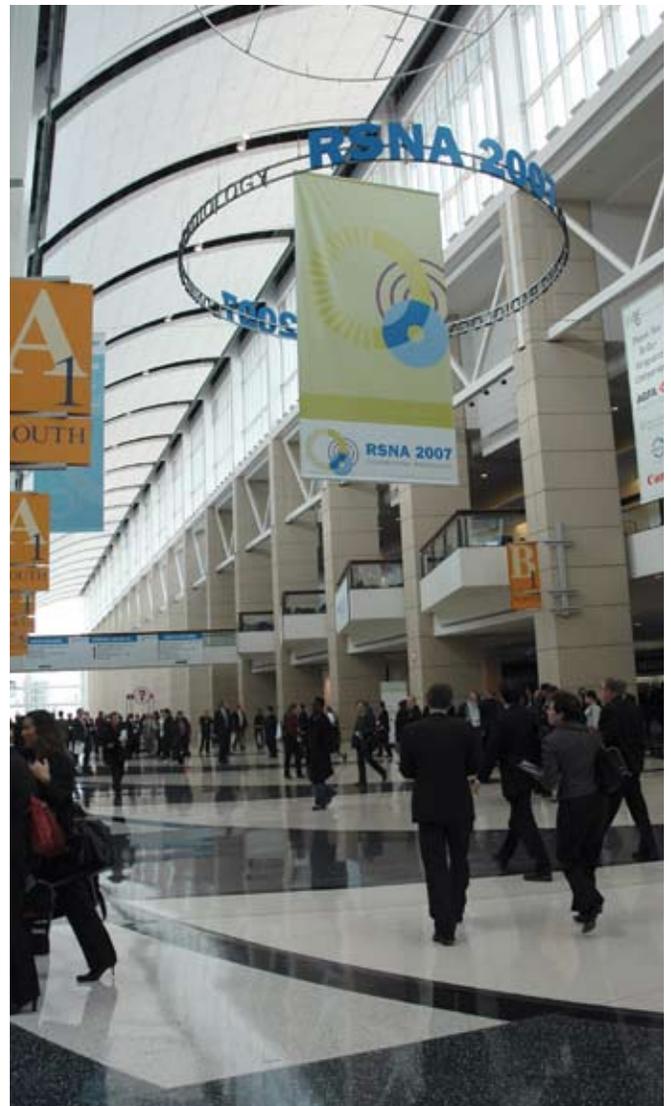
Although there are still big tasks ahead for the profession, RAs already have accomplished many positive outcomes, Ms. Renner pointed out. Two of these — addressing the radiologist shortage and providing a career ladder for radiologic technologists — were planned from the beginning. But others were unintended, such as:

- Drawing more ambitious and highly motivated students into R.T. programs, with the eventual goal of becoming RAs.
- Providing patients with more individualized attention.
- Reducing patient wait times.
- Setting up “checks and balances” within the radiology team so that errors are less likely.
- Improving patient throughput.
- Possibly decreasing costs (although this needs more research).
- Improving accessibility.

One key to RAs’ success in the future will be keeping educational programs “fluid enough to evolve with practice” while continuing to ensure that RAs have “a sound and in-depth knowledge base,” Ms. Renner concluded. ♦



A visitor to one of the two exhibit halls runs through a demonstration.



Participants had to manage their time wisely, even though the event was six days long.