Postdoctoral fellow Christie Yumin Hu, M.D., Ph.D., works in the laboratory of her mentor, Guillermo Garcia-Manero, M.D., an associate professor in the Department of Leukemia at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, in search of more effective, less toxic treatments for leukemia patients. Hu is one of a dozen promising young postdoctoral and clinical investigators whose research projects have benefited from the Kimberly Patterson Fellowship in Leukemia Research.

The Kimberly Patterson Fellowship in Leukemia Research
Leukemia Patient's Legacy Lives on at MD Anderson

The Kimberly Patterson Fellowship in Leukemia Research at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center honors the memory of a courageous patient and her wish to support research to eradicate the disease.

Established through the Kimberly Patterson Leukemia Research Fund (www.kimsfund.org), the fellowship already has enriched the work of 12 young postdoctoral and clinical investigators at MD Anderson. Their findings are helping to fulfill that wish.

The endowed fellowship is named for Kim Patterson Murphy, a native of Sarasota, Fla., who was working in New York for a design firm in 1999 when she was diagnosed with acute myelogenous leukemia (AML). After a brief remission, Kim came to MD Anderson for a bone marrow transplant. At Kim's insistence, her fiancé, Brian Murphy, and her parents, Nora and John Patterson, arranged for funds raised by friends in New York for a post-recovery vacation to instead support leukemia research and housing assistance for families of bone marrow transplant patients at MD Anderson. Kim and Brian were married in the chapel at MD Anderson on Nov. 4, 2000. She died about two weeks later, at age 29.

A decade later, Kim's Fund continues to grow. Deborah Thomas, M.D., an associate professor in the Department of Leukemia at MD Anderson, serves as medical adviser and assists in directing grants to innovative projects destined to produce significant research advances.

One such opportunity lies in the research of Christie Yumin Hu, M.D., Ph.D., a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Leukemia at MD Anderson and recent recipient of the Patterson Fellowship. The fellowship enabled Hu to continue exciting research focused on designing more effective, less toxic treatments for leukemia patients. Her study of the organic compound PEITC in combination with another anti-cancer compound called SAHA, published in the journal Blood, points to nontoxic alternatives to inhibiting clinical resistance to AML treatments, the type of leukemia from which Kim Patterson suffered.

"PEITC, found in cruciferous vegetables such as broccoli and cabbage, is nontoxic to normal cells but very toxic to cancer cells," says Hu, who finds enormous rewards in translational research and seeing results in "real patients."

The fellowship award also gave Hu the means to pursue invaluable professional development opportunities such as the April 2010 A.C. Camargo Global Meeting of Translational Science in Brazil.

Awards such as the Patterson Fellowship are fundamental on two levels, says Hu's mentor, Guillermo Garcia-Manero, M.D., an associate professor in the Department of Leukemia.

"Certainly, the monetary award provides welcomed financial assistance," says Garcia-Manero. "Plus, the recognition validates novel research projects and lends emotional support as the fellows endeavor to become independent investigators."

Donor-supported fellowships not only are highly competitive at MD Anderson, but also are extremely valued for the win-win situation they create, says Toya Candelari, Dr.P.H., associate vice president for trainee and alumni affairs.

"Behind each of these fellowship awards is a generous donor who commits an amount that can be endowed permanently, enabling us to distribute the accumulated interest funds each year," says Candelari. "We are very sensitive to finding the best candidate to match the donor's specific funding criteria."

Hu says she is honored to have been chosen to receive the Patterson Fellowship. Like other recipients and those to come in the future, she's helping open doors to new and improved therapies to fight leukemia — just as Kim wished.

Photo by Erin McCormick