

TOP ONCOLOGY TALENT

A Recipe for Success

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The Dilemma

Maintaining a high-quality workforce is a challenge for today's healthcare leaders. Abundant literature documents the international nursing shortage and its impact on healthcare organizations. While the dollar cost of turnover varies depending on the healthcare specialty, the effects of turnover include higher labor costs, lower productivity, negative working conditions, and potentially a negative influence on the quality of care, patient satisfaction, and patient loyalty. Studies suggest a direct correlation between high nursing turnover and quality patient care.^{1,2} And labor shortages in other oncology specialties are an issue in today's demanding healthcare environment.

The Solution

At M. D. Anderson Cancer Center Orlando, we implemented several successful recruitment and retention strategies. While this article focuses primarily on oncology nurses, the strategies outlined can apply to all oncology healthcare professionals.



Mission One

Our mission at M. D. Anderson Cancer Center Orlando is to “use every available resource to defeat cancer.” This powerful statement is one that physicians, nurses, and other members of the healthcare team can embrace. While a compelling mission and competitive salaries may help recruit top talent, staff retention requires more. Providing a supportive work environment that allows continued professional growth while balancing work and family life is a challenge for any employer, but it is necessary to retain a high-functioning team. At M.D. Anderson Cancer Center Orlando, the nursing leadership team has focused on this need for a “flexible” workforce—in particular, one that addresses both the aging oncology nursing workforce and novice oncology nurses. Graduate nurses who have a “passion for oncology” are hired, trained, and mentored by our leadership team.

Career Advancement

Employee surveys, staff meetings, and focus groups clearly indicated that nurses at our medical center wanted to be recognized and compensated for their advanced education, experience, and knowledge. Physicians also wanted a mechanism to recognize the experienced oncology nursing staff. In response, our program established two career pathways—for nurses in clinical practice and nurses in management.

Registered Nurse Clinical Ladder. The goal of this program is to promote clinical excellence and professional development of nurses that provide direct patient care in the inpatient and outpatient hospital setting, as well as in the physician practice setting. The Nurse Clinical Ladder Program is designed to:

- Differentiate levels of education and competency for registered nurses (RNs) providing direct patient care
- Improve quality of clinical care and patient outcomes by providing a highly skilled work force
- Attract, reward, and retain RNs through structured recognition of professional growth and development
- Encourage and reward attainment of higher levels of education, certification, and practice.

Each of the five rungs on the Registered Nurse Clinical Ladder has different experience, education, and national certification requirements. The Registered Nurse Clinical Ladder allows nurses to be recognized as they advance professionally and compensates nurses incrementally as they advance up the rungs of the ladder. The program allows other members of the healthcare team to identify the experienced nurses who have achieved additional credentials.

The first rung is designated for new graduate nurses, with additional compensation for a baccalaureate degree.

Nurses that move to the third rung of the ladder choose to serve as either a preceptor for new team members and students or as a mentor for novice oncology nurses. Nurses serving as mentors develop a contract between themselves and the novice nurse being mentored. Nurses at the top level of the ladder must hold a masters degree in nursing, have national certification (OCN® or AOCN®), and practice at the bedside.

Nursing Management Clinical Ladder. For nurses on a management career path, this program serves as a way to develop and recognize future nursing leaders, as well as to recruit and retain top talent. Additional potential benefits include improving quality care, financial performance, customer service, and staff retention.

The Nursing Management Clinical Ladder Program is designed to:

- Differentiate levels of education and competency for nursing management in the acute care, inpatient, and outpatient settings
- Improve the quality of clinical care, patient outcomes, and management skills by providing a highly skilled workforce
- Attract, reward, and retain nursing management team members through structured recognition of professional growth and development
- Encourage and reward attainment of higher levels of education, certification, and practice.

The program has two levels for assistant nurse managers and two levels for nurse managers. As with the clinical ladder, nurse leaders move up the ladder based on experience, education, and national certification. The assistant nurse manager and nurse manager that reach the second rung are asked to mentor other new nursing leaders.

Both ladders encourage nurses to continue their education and hold certification in their specialty. At M.D. Anderson Cancer Center Orlando, we have developed similar career advancement ladders for nurse practitioners, radiation therapists, dosimetrists, and physicists.

Fostering Leadership

Aspiring leaders may participate in a nine-month leadership development series, known as L.E.A.D. (Leadership, Education, Alignment, Development). Team members with an interest (and untapped ability) in future leadership compete to participate in this special program. Each year, the L.E.A.D. Steering Committee, which is comprised of managers, directors, and administrators, select 24 L.E.A.D. team members from a variety of disciplines. Acceptance is based on three factors: 1) written eligibility criteria, 2) a formal interview and approval from the L.E.A.D. steering committee, and 3) a commitment from

Recognition, Rewards, and Celebrations

Team members are recognized in a variety of ways, including:

- **An Awards Banquet for Certified Nurses.** This sponsored event is held annually to recognize nurses who have achieved OCN® or AOCN® certification. At M.D. Anderson Cancer Center Orlando, more than 75 percent of eligible oncology nurses have achieved this national certification.
- **Champion of the Quarter.** Four times a year, an employee is selected by a group of his or her peers group to receive \$200 for contributions to the cancer center. Team members are nominated by their peers or managers.
- **Oncology Nurse of the Year.** Exemplars are submitted annually, and a nurse is selected based on his or her contributions to patient care and the nursing profession.
- **Helping Hands and Caring Hearts Awards.** Select cancer care staff is recognized for contributions to the team and patient care. These awards are included with the employee's semi-annual evaluation.

the participant and his or her manager to uphold the program's structures and expectations.

One day each month, team members attend classes at a site away from the medical center. The curriculum, taught by the senior executive team, offers diverse learning opportunities using multiple development methods. Some of the methods used to "teach" include didactic presentations from subject matter experts, reading books and articles related to the topics, one-on-one discussion with health-care leaders, experiential activities, structured observation, and round table discussions. Many team members that have attended the L.E.A.D. program have been promoted within the facility.

Professional Education and Certification

Assuring that nursing staff are up-to-date professionally is critical to a stable workforce. Our cancer center offers several educational initiatives that support the development of a competent, knowledgeable staff. Some examples include:

Basic and advanced oncology courses. Experienced oncology nurses that join our team must obtain chemotherapy verification either through an examination or by completing a two-day course within three months of employment. Novice oncology nurses are required to successfully complete an in-house curriculum, "Fundamentals of Oncology," within the first year of employment. This program was developed internally and provides participants with a "beginner's" knowledge of cancer and cancer care. These courses are taught by a medical oncology clinical nurse specialist and an oncology pharmacist. All nurses are verified annually through a clinical review of knowledge and skills by examination.

Monthly nursing grand rounds. Each month a different pharmaceutical company sponsors a one-hour lunch or breakfast series, which features expert presentations from a variety of oncology speakers.

National certification. Oncology Nursing Certification (OCN®) review classes are offered annually by the local chapter of the Oncology Nursing Society. Our program has also established support groups for nurses preparing to take the



At M.D. Anderson Cancer Center Orlando, a highly trained nursing staff partners with a team of medical specialists to deliver multidisciplinary cancer care to patients. Members of this team include, from left to right, Karen Sahuc, RN, BSN, OCN®; Beth Mullican, RN; Rita Mahaffey, RN, BSN, OCN®; Mary Hudson, RN, OCN®; Anne McCumber, Nursing Operations Manager; Dolores Tanner, RN, OCN®; and Mary Peterson, RN.

Fast Facts

- Hospitals are coping with a shortage of 126,000 RNs.¹
- Analysts predict that the shortage will increase to more than 400,000 by 2020.¹
- By the year 2020, the RN workforce is forecasted to be roughly the same size as it is today, declining nearly 20 percent below projected RN workforce requirements.²
- The primary factor that has led to the aging of the RN workforce appears to be the decline in younger women choosing nursing as a career during the last two decades.³
- The average age of new RN graduates is 31 years.⁴
- By 2010, the average age of RNs is forecasted to be 45.4 years, an increase of 3.5 years over the current age, with more than 40 percent of the RN workforce expected to be older than 50 years.⁴
- About half of the RN workforce is expected to reach retirement age within the next 10 to 15 years.⁴
- About 70 percent of nurses say that their facility has a major or moderate problem retaining and recruiting qualified nurses.⁵
- Nurses cite understaffing, the physical demands of the job, lack of management support, and unpredictable work schedule and long work hours as the biggest “problems” of being a nurse.⁵
- Half of nurses say that, within the past two years,

they have considered leaving the patient care field for reasons other than retirement.⁵

- Top reasons for leaving the nursing profession: less stressful/physically demanding job, regular hours and work schedule, more money, advancement opportunities, raising a family, and fewer hours.⁵

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⁴Oncology Nursing Society. *Health Resources and Services Administration Nursing Workforce Programs: FY 2006 Appropriations Issues Brief*. Available online at: www.ons.org/lac/pdf/NursingShortage.pdf. Last Accessed Nov. 15, 2006.

⁵The Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals. *The Nurse Shortage: Perspectives from Current Direct Care Nurses and Former Direct Care Nurses*. Available online at: www.aft.org/pubs-reports/healthcare/Hart_Report.pdf. Last Accessed Nov. 15, 2006.



From left to right, Diane Budnovich, LPN; Linda Jones, RN, OCN®; Mark Meyer, RN; and Juan Mercado-Casiano, RN, BSN, (seated) are part of the committed cancer care team that provides patients with extraordinary attention that is based on their individual diagnosis and medical needs.

exam, partnering these nurses up with established nurses that have already achieved national certification. Because we strongly encourage this certification, nurses are reimbursed for their initial certification costs and renewal costs.

Tuition reimbursement. This benefit is offered to all team members that have been employed at least six months, with a higher level of reimbursement being offered to registered nurses.

On-site college classes. Classes for staff wishing to pursue bachelor's and master's degrees are offered on-site at the medical center through collaboration with local universities.

Monthly Mind, Body, Spirit Series. A variety of classes, such as yoga, Chi Gong, Tai Chi, and meditation, are offered at either low cost or free for medical center employees. Many nurses have completed classes on Healing Touch and Reiki and have incorporated these therapies into their practice.

An Enduring Partnership

The literature suggests that nurse-physician collaboration is critical to retaining top talent.^{3,4} Mutual respect, effective communication, and forums where the multidisciplinary team can meet are important ingredients in creating an environment that fosters collaboration and a positive work environment. Availability of adequate resources, including supportive personnel for physicians and nurses, has been a major component of nurse and physician satisfaction. At M.D. Anderson Cancer Center Orlando, advanced practice nurses, including nurse practitioners and clinical nurse



An integral element of the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center Orlando is to provide care in a supportive and comfortable atmosphere. Here Kristen Phillips, RN, BSN, OCN® flushes a central line (IV access), while a cancer patient relaxes in a recliner.

specialists, are key resources to the entire nursing team. Additionally, our program offers a variety of forums for collaborative efforts with the multidisciplinary team:

Schwartz Center Rounds are a forum where clinical and non-clinical caregivers discuss their experiences, thoughts, and feelings regarding the topic presented. Schwartz Rounds, which differ from medical or ethical rounds, offer caregivers a safe, open, and relaxed place where they can share their concerns and fears about their patients and themselves. These one-hour rounds are held during lunch and cover topics such as “Caring for a Colleague,” “Caring for Young Patients,” and “Are We Connecting with our Patients or Are We Too Busy?” Offered every other month, Schwartz Rounds are one of our most popular forums for nurses, physicians, and other members of the cancer care team.

Multidisciplinary planning conferences are held each week. At these conferences, staff present patient cases and solicit ideas and feedback concerning patient care from other team members.

Participatory management is vital to retaining top talent. Staff participates in monthly **patient planning meetings**, which are held in the outpatient areas prior to seeing scheduled patients. Additionally, medical staff and the leadership team also hold monthly staff meetings.

Our **oncology collaborative practice team** is a multidisciplinary team of experts in medical oncology. This group meets every month to discuss patient care issues, quality, and opportunities for improvement.

Flexibility and Balance

Successful staff recruitment and retention programs are balanced and flexible, resulting in innovative ideas and programs. Here are a few examples of creative programs that we have had success with:

■ **Transition plans for experienced oncology nurses.** When we heard that the physical demands of the inpatient unit were making it difficult for many of our veteran oncology nurses to continue on as full-time employees, we adopted an innovative transition plan. This program encourages and supports experienced oncology nurses to “transition” from the inpatient setting to the outpatient arena where the hours and physical demands are less intense. This program allowed top-caliber employees to extend their careers, at the same time offering tremendous depth to the cancer care team.

■ **Flexible hours.** “Mommy Hours” are one example of the flexible, abbreviated shifts our cancer center offers to nursing staff. While flexible hours can be more challenging from a management and scheduling perspective, implementing “Mommy Hours” allows top-notch nurs-

ing talent to continue contributing professionally yet still meet their family needs.

■ **Spirit of Caregiving.** This two-day workshop is designed to help team members better understand challenges faced by their colleagues and for individuals to identify “possibilities” in their lives. In a relaxed and caring environment, team members explore important elements in their personal and professional lives.

Value Your Assets

Former United States Secretary of Labor Robert Reich once said, “Your most precious possession is not your financial assets. Your most precious possession is the people you have working there, and what they carry around in their heads, and their ability to work together.”

While there is no magic formula to staff recruitment and retention, our program has identified three key elements: 1) providing an atmosphere that promotes and recognizes education and certification, 2) establishing and supporting educational advancement, and 3) fostering multidisciplinary collaboration. 📌

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