

# CSOs—

# Certified Specialists in Oncology Nutrition

## Taking nutrition care in community cancer centers to new heights

by Barbara Grant, MS, RD, CSO, LD

For registered dietitians (RDs) working in oncology care settings, a thorough understanding and knowledge of cancer and its treatment are essential, including knowledge about conventional cancer treatment practices, supportive care practices, and cancer-related complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) therapies. Oncology nutrition registered dietitians also need to know how to proactively manage symptoms and side effects that impact their patients' nutritional status. The new board certified Specialist in Oncology Nutrition or "CSO" credential denotes that registered dietitians possess this specialized knowledge, competence, and experience in oncology nutrition.

Board certification as a Specialist in Oncology Nutrition is offered through the Commission on Dietetic Registration (CDR), the credentialing agency for the American Dietetic Association (ADA). CDR is an independent credentialing organization that develops, administers, and awards the CSO credential to qualified registered dietitians. Just as the "OCN" (oncology certified nurse) credential represents a validation of individuals' knowledge in cancer nursing for registered nurses, the CSO credential represents a comparable confirmation to patients, the public, and healthcare institutions that oncology nutrition registered dietitians are practicing at a competent level to ensure patient safety.

This article talks about this new specialty board certification in oncology nutrition, as well as professional resources, *Standards of Practice*, and *Standards for Professional Performance* for registered dietitians working in oncology nutrition.

### Certification Eligibility

CDR defines oncology nutrition practice as: "RDs working directly with individuals at risk for, or diagnosed with, any type of malignancy or pre-malignant condition, in a variety of settings (e.g., hospitals, clinics, cancer centers, hospices, public health) OR indirectly through roles in management, education, industry, and research practice linked specifically to oncology nutrition."<sup>1</sup>

According to CDR, to be eligible to become board certified in oncology nutrition and use the specialty CSO cre-

dential, individuals must first possess the registered dietitian (RD) credential. An RD is a registered dietitian who has at least a baccalaureate degree from an accredited college or university, including specific academic and supervised practice requirements and has successfully completed the CDR's registration examination and maintained ongoing registration through continuing professional education. Additional requirements to be eligible for board certification in oncology nutrition include:

- Current RD status by CDR
- Maintenance of RD status with CDR for a minimum of two years
- Documentation of 2,000 hours practice experience as an RD in oncology nutrition within the past five years. (Certain education and professional experience can be used as substitution for the required 2,000 specialty practice hours.)<sup>1</sup>

### Application and Certification Testing Process

Certification is granted to qualified candidates who meet the required eligibility criteria, complete a specialty application, and successfully pass the CSO examination. The specialty examination fee is \$250. The certification period is five years, and certified specialists receive 75 continuing professional education units (CPEUs). CSO examinations are offered by CDR twice a year (two three-week testing windows) and are administered by computer at designated testing centers throughout the United States. The examinations consist of 150 multiple-choice and scenario-based questions. Location of testing centers, the examination content outline and exam study resources, and CDR specialist information are available on CDR's website at: <http://www.cdrnet.org/certifications/spec/oncology.htm>. You can also contact CDR's Manager of Professional Assessment by telephone at: 800.877.1600, ext. 4705, or by email at: [specialists@eatright.org](mailto:specialists@eatright.org).<sup>1</sup>

### Certification Renewal

At the end of the five-year CSO certification period, specialists who wish to recertify must be a current RD with the CDR and:

- Successfully complete the eligibility application, including the required minimum number of practice hours
- Successfully complete the specialty examination
- Submit a \$250 recertification fee.

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The reasoning for requiring recertification testing: the CSO credential represents to the public and healthcare institutions that the certified specialist possesses current knowledge, skills, and experience in oncology nutrition. The nature of knowledge and skills to practice at a specialty level is subject to change due to technological and scientific advances. Recertification helps provide continuing assurance that the certified specialist has indeed maintained his or her knowledge in oncology nutrition.<sup>1</sup>

### Can a Nutritionist Become a CSO?

Nutritionists may provide oncology nutrition services at some community cancer centers. Nutritionists are not eligible to become CSOs.

Several accredited nutritionist programs exist in the United States, offering two-year and college-level education. A few of these programs grant a certified nutritionist (CN) credential after successful completion of an examination; however, “nutritionist” is not a universally protected credential or title. In most states, any individual—whether or not he or she possesses formal training and education—can refer to themselves as a “nutritionist.” At present, no specialty board certification exists for CNs practicing in oncology nutrition.

### ACCC’s Cancer Program Guidelines for Nutritional Support Services

The Association of Community Cancer Centers (ACCC) outlines in its *Cancer Program Guidelines* the specific recommendations and rationale for nutritional support services

in cancer programs and characteristics for the registered dietitians that provide oncology nutrition care (see Table 1, below).<sup>2</sup> Of note, the *Cancer Program Guidelines* state that nutritional support services be provided by registered dietitians. Characteristics of oncology nutritional professionals include education and experience in the specialized nutritional needs of patients with cancer. ACCC’s *Cancer Program Guidelines* also state that nutritional professionals should be registered by CDR, the credentialing organization affiliated with the American Dietetic Association.<sup>2</sup>

### Oncology Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group

Another key resource for registered dietitians is the Oncology Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group, a professional practice group within the ADA with more than 1,600 members who specialize in oncology nutrition care for individuals at risk for or diagnosed with cancer.<sup>3</sup> Oncology nutrition practice covers a vast array of areas such as prevention, treatment, recovery from treatment, survivorship, palliative care, hospice, education, industry, and research. Any registered dietitian who is a member of the ADA can become a member of the Oncology Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group. The group provides its members with an electronic listserve to network with colleagues from across the United States and eligible members of the Canadian Dietetic Association.

The Oncology Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group has worked with CDR to create a board certification CSO credential for registered dietitians in oncology nutrition.

**Table 1. ACCC Cancer Program Guidelines—Section 8: Nutritional Support Services**

#### Guideline I

A registered dietitian is available to work with patients and their families, especially those identified at risk for having nutritional problems or special needs.

#### Rationale

Nutritional status can be adversely affected by the disease process, including treatments such as chemotherapy, surgery, immunotherapy, and radiation therapy. The nutrition professional works in conjunction with patients, families, and members of the multidisciplinary team to help maintain optimal nutritional status throughout the course of disease, treatments, remission, and/or recurrence.

#### Characteristics

1. The nutrition professional has education and experience in the specialized nutritional needs of patients with cancer and in minimizing the risk of cancer through dietary counseling.
2. Staffing of nutrition professionals is adequate to meet the needs of cancer patients and their families.
3. The nutrition professional provides education to medical and nursing staff to ensure appropriate assessment and referral of patients.
4. The nutrition professional is registered by the American Dietetic Association.

#### Guideline II

The nutrition professional in conjunction with the patient, family, and oncology team manages nutrition and hydration.

#### Rationale

The nutritional needs of patients are unique to each individual.

#### Characteristics

- a. The nutrition professional:
  1. Performs an initial nutritional assessment and follow-up nutritional planning as needed with the patient and family.
  2. Counsels the patient and family on basic nutritional needs.
  3. Identifies common nutritional problems the patient may encounter during the course of his/her disease and treatment.
  4. Formulates an individualized nutrition care plan based on assessment findings.
  5. Assesses the patient’s and/or family’s ability to understand and comply with nutritional education and instruction.

#### Guideline III

The nutrition professional provides dietary guidelines about reducing cancer risk through program materials and services to the community.

## Standards of Practice and Standards of Professional Performance

The Oncology Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group under the guidance of the ADA's Quality Management Committee has developed another resource for registered dietitians in oncology nutrition practice settings: the *Standards of Practice (SOP)* and *Standards of Professional Performance (SOPP)*. The *SOP/SOPP for RDs in Oncology Nutrition Care* was published in the June 2006 issue of the *Journal of American Dietetic Association*.<sup>4</sup> The Oncology Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group's intention was to create a tool for registered dietitians practicing in oncology to:

1. Evaluate their own practice
2. Identify areas for professional development
3. Demonstrate competency in this specialty area of practice.

The document was also developed to guide the development of high-quality continuing education programs and materials, to conduct much-needed outcomes research, and to pursue specialty practice certification in oncology nutrition. The *SOP/SOPP for RDs in Oncology Nutrition Care* is available online at: [www.oncologynutrition.org/pdf/SOP\\_SOPP.pdf](http://www.oncologynutrition.org/pdf/SOP_SOPP.pdf).

## The Clinical Guide to Oncology Nutrition

This professional desk reference, produced by the Oncology Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group, represents the most current oncology nutrition research and is the clinician's guide to understanding the nutritional needs and risks of cancer patients and to anticipating and responding with appropriate nutrition care. *The Clinical Guide to Oncology*

*Nutrition, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, explores the fundamentals—from nutrition screening to therapy protocols to pharmacological management—with new chapters devoted to the American Cancer Society (ACS) survivor guidelines, reimbursement guidelines, and outcomes research.<sup>3,5</sup> ■

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## References

<sup>1</sup>Commission on Dietetic Registration. Certified Specialist in Oncology. Available online at: [www.cdrnet.org/certifications/spec/oncology.htm](http://www.cdrnet.org/certifications/spec/oncology.htm) Last accessed Sept. 16, 2009.

<sup>2</sup>Association of Community Cancer Centers. *ACCC Cancer Program Guidelines*. Section 8: Nutrition Support Services. March, 2009. Available online at: [www.accc-cancer.org/publications/pdf/publications\\_cpguidelines.pdf](http://www.accc-cancer.org/publications/pdf/publications_cpguidelines.pdf). Last accessed Sept. 16, 2009.

<sup>3</sup>Oncology Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group. Member Website. Available at [www.oncologynutrition.org](http://www.oncologynutrition.org). Last accessed Sept. 16, 2009.

<sup>4</sup>Robien K, Levin R, Pritchett E, Otto M. American Dietetic Association: Standards of Practice and Standards of Professional Performance for Registered Dietitians (Generalist, Specialty, and Advanced in Oncology Nutrition Care). *J Am Diet Assoc*. 106(6): 946-951;2006.

<sup>5</sup>Elliott L, McCallum PD, Molseed L, Grant B, eds. *The Clinical Guide to Oncology Nutrition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Chicago, IL: American Dietetic Association; 2006.

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<b>International Oncology Network</b> <a href="http://www.iononline.com">www.iononline.com</a>	10
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<b>The Oncology Business Institute</b> <a href="http://www.TOBImember.com">www.TOBImember.com</a>	16
<b>Oncology Management Consulting Group</b> <a href="http://www.oncologymgmt.com">www.oncologymgmt.com</a>	7
<b>Professional Opportunities</b>	51
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