

ONS Addresses the Challenge of the Oncology Nursing Workforce Shortage

by Paula T. Rieger, RN, MSN, CAE, FAAN

One of the greatest challenges facing cancer care today is the critical shortage of healthcare professionals, particularly nurses. The nursing shortage is projected to grow as increasing numbers of nurses retire. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, almost 45 percent of RNs were age 50 or older in 2008, and the overall average age of RNs in the United States is 47.¹ Nurses who specialize in oncology will especially be impacted by the trend as the number of patients diagnosed with cancer increases as the population ages.

Although cancer continues to be a deadly disease, emerging trends in diagnosis and treatment as well as early detection have led to most patients living at least five years beyond diagnosis, with the number of cancer survivors continuing to grow.² This trend results in a long-term relationship among patients, families and caregivers, and oncology nurses. Oncology nurses are critical to the cancer care team, but the shrinking nurse workforce will result in fewer nurses who choose oncology nursing as a career, stay in oncology nursing, and become certified in oncology nursing, thus having the potential to negatively impact the quality of cancer care.³

A major factor contributing to the shortage is that nursing programs are turning away an increasing number of qualified applicants because of a shortage of nursing faculty. Top reasons for the faculty shortage include:⁴

- A lack of qualified candidates to fill the positions
- Substantially lower salaries in teaching than in clinical care
- Budget constraints.

Almost half of all nurse faculty are expected to reach retirement age within the next decade.⁵

What is ONS Doing?

Nurses have realized the value of their collective voices in the political process. The health policy agenda of the Oncology Nursing Society (ONS) urges Congress to expand and prioritize funding for programs that encourage nurses to become and serve as faculty. ONS also encourages Congress and the administration to provide increased funding in 2011 to the Nurse Reinvestment Act and other Health Resources and Services Administration nursing workforce programs, as well as the National Institute of Nursing Research, to ensure the nation has an adequate supply of oncology nurses to provide quality care and conduct cancer research.

ONS has presented written testimony to the House Labor, Health and Human Services Appropriations Subcommittee regarding nursing- and cancer-related funding to secure and maintain an adequate oncology nursing workforce to care for people with cancer.

ONS asks to incorporate and include RNs and advanced practice registered nurses (APRN) as integral providers in the provision, coordination, and reimbursement of care delivered as part of coordinated care models.

How NPPs Can Help

One way to meet the needs of a growing population of patients with cancer is in the expansion of the roles of non-physician practitioners (NPPs). APRNs provide leadership and clinical expertise to patients, families, and members of the healthcare team. APRN roles in oncology are the clinical nurse specialist (CNS) and nurse practitioner (NP). APRNs work with oncologists in their practices and also can lead certain specialized clinics, such as survivor follow-up, or services, such as palliative care or pain management. A study on NPPs, such as nurse practitioners and physician assistants, is being conducted by the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) and funded by Susan G. Komen for the Cure.⁶ This study will evaluate different models for integrating these practitioners into the provision of care in response to the shortage of oncologists.⁶

Education is Key

NPs are educated at the master's or doctoral level. Improving and standardizing the cancer care education available to NPs entering the oncology field is essential to providing quality cancer care.⁷ Graduate and continuing education programs and workshops can meet these needs.

ONS serves as a professional home and provides continuing education opportunities at all levels for its 36,000 members. ONS has conducted a successful skills workshop offering both didactic and hands-on training in skills for the novice oncology NP entitled "The Nuts and Bolts of Advanced Oncology Care—Oncology Nursing Society's Novice Oncology NP Workshop." The goals of the workshop include establishing a foundation for advanced practice in oncology for the NP with limited or no prior experience in oncology and establishing a network and resource set for the NP new to oncology. Plans for additional workshops are underway. ONS also has developed entry-level competencies for oncology NPs and offers intensive continuing education specifically designed for APRNs.

Through a grant from Susan G. Komen for the Cure, ONS is working to identify and delineate gaps in undergraduate and graduate nursing curriculum related to oncology nursing. Our goal: to develop resources to fill these gaps and to serve as the definitive resource for oncology nursing practice for schools of nursing. In addition, ONS is collaborating with specialty nursing organizations to build a sustainable infrastructure for oncology-related initiatives, such as the incorporation of oncology practice standards and best practices in the care of patients with cancer.



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Radiation Oncology Nurses

Another issue ONS is concerned with is in regard to staffing of radiation centers. Not all radiation centers have nurses, but those that do will be affected by future retirements. Radiation therapy is provided on an outpatient basis; nurses typically work only one shift, staying until all treatment is completed for the day. This schedule means that nurses may stay on duty until late in the evening. Attracting nurses to this work setting can be a challenge.

As a result of the shortage, radiation centers may need to recruit more new graduates and nurses from specialties other than oncology. Radiation centers have traditionally attracted nurses from inpatient oncology or chemotherapy

treatment centers, but the path is changing. Hiring new graduates and nurses from non-oncology specialties results in significant changes to the length and content of orientation. One group that may be well-suited to this setting is second-career nurses from accelerated programs. These nurses may be more likely to have the communication, collaboration, and coordination skills needed for success in the radiation therapy department and, as a result, will be highly sought for these positions. ONS is dedicated to providing resources and education for all these groups as we work to address workforce issues.

Planning for the Future

ONS is committed to excellence in oncology nursing and to leading the transformation of cancer care by initiating and actively supporting educational, legislative, and public awareness efforts to improve the care of people with cancer. As a professional society, we continue to provide the education and training necessary to ensure that oncology nurses are prepared for the rapid advancements in cancer treatment and to provide quality cancer care. 📖

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References

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