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# The Role of the Oncology-Certified Nurse in Research

by Marcia Grant, R.N., D.N.Sc., F.A.A.N.

**T**hroughout the full range of cancer research activities, oncology-certified nurses provide a pivotal role and serve as an invaluable resource for community cancer programs. These certified nurses are assets in advocating and applying research at community cancer programs.

Oncology-certified nurses participate in four aspects of cancer research: 1) promoting a research climate within an institution, 2) applying research findings to practice, 3) collaborating with other researchers in carrying out studies, and 4) participating in the conduct of research.

Three kinds of certification are currently recognized by the Oncology Nursing Society. Oncology-certified nurses with the basic or pediatric credentials (See article on certification, page 24) participate in the first three aspects; those with advanced certification participate in all four. The participation and expertise of nurses may vary in relation to past experience, interest, and job expectations. Regardless, the certification provides evidence of a level of oncology knowledge and a commitment to oncology patients frequently not present in non-certified nurses and valuable in supporting oncology research.

## PROMOTING A RESEARCH CLIMATE

One of the most valuable roles of the oncology-certified nurse is to

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promote a research climate within an institution. One component of this activity occurs when oncology-certified nurses participate in nursing division activities, which may include establishing and revising policies, procedures, and standards according to current research findings. For instance, the certified nurse can be a valuable resource for identifying deficiencies in the pain management practice at an institution and establishing methods needed to meet the new 2000 Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) standards for pain management.

Searching for and providing literature references for policies, procedures, and standards are other ways used to promote research application. Certified nurses may mentor other staff nurses in interpreting nursing and medical research reports, with an emphasis on maintaining and improving excellent cancer nursing care. Establishing a journal club to review articles of importance in a discussion setting is a desirable approach to improve familiarity and confidence in reading and applying research findings. Because gathering groups of nurses at the same time may be difficult, using creative strategies to circulate self-learning packets to the nursing staff is one approach that provides education to all staff. Packets of materials may include question-and-answer surveys along with articles and article abstracts.

The oncology-certified nurse may be called on to assist patients in understanding research that is conducted at the institution. Modeling such communication to other nursing staff helps all staff become more comfortable in talking to patients and families about

participating in nursing and medical research. This is extremely valuable in institutions participating in pediatric or adult cooperative group or in-house studies. An important aspect of the certified nurse is the advocacy role for patients, which involves making sure that the patient and family understand the care being administered and understand treatment and research options. Promoting a research climate is valuable for both nursing and medical staff as well as patients. Creating a research climate leads to the identification of clinical problems and gaps in nursing practice knowledge that could be amenable to clinical research studies.

## RESEARCH UTILIZATION

A second role for the oncology certified-nurse is to apply findings of current and established research, and as a result, to promote research utilization or evidence-based nursing practice.<sup>2</sup> It involves dissemination within an organization of new research findings and applying them to the nursing care of oncology patients. An important aspect of this activity involves evaluating research findings for their clinical feasibility within the individual institutional setting. For example, recent study findings indicate the value of exercise as an approach to cancer-related fatigue. Oncology-certified nurses, especially those at the advanced level, can critique these studies and evaluate findings in relation to the specific populations of cancer patients (such as diagnosis, age, socioeconomic status, class, ethnicity) cared for at the institution. If using these findings to create interventions for patients is in order, the certified nurses can identify resources needed (such as clinical guidelines, rehabilitation

department collaboration, nursing staff education, and physician orders) to apply these findings.

As specific clinical changes occur based on published evidence, the certified nurse serves as an appropriate clinician to conduct the utilization and dissemination activities. This may involve creating a team of nursing staff and other department representatives to evaluate research findings on specific clinical problems, adapting findings to institution-specific populations, teaching staff specific aspects of care, demonstrating clinical techniques, and creating monitors before and after implementation for evaluation.

An important aspect of this process involves interpretation of research findings in relation to specific clinical problems identified. The advanced oncology-certified nurse has the background and expertise for taking research findings published in professional journals and interpreting these findings for clinical use. The result is evidence-based practice that provides quality nursing care for cancer patients.

### **COLLABORATING WITH OTHER RESEARCHERS**

An even more active role for oncology-certified nurses is to collaborate with other researchers in carrying out studies. When nursing or medical research protocols are written or adapted to the institution, the certified nurse participates in the research team and can identify clinical, education, and administrative issues. For example, if a new chemotherapy protocol is to be adapted, the certified nurse can assist in identifying patient and clinical resources necessary to implement the protocol and discuss them with the administration

should additional resources be needed for implementation. For the pediatric setting, education of the patient's family is critical.

Education of staff may also be identified and implemented by the certified nurse, especially if new chemotherapy regimens or experimental drugs are being tested. For instance, if a medication is to be administered through a different route, in different doses, and with specific timed-medications, it is essential to educate staff in the protocol, as well as inform them on the resources that are available for checking the protocol during implementation.

With their understanding of research, oncology-certified nurses can assist in the identification of and the consenting process for patients eligible for specific nursing and medical research protocols. In this role, the certified nurse is a valuable asset to the physician accruing patients to clinical trials. Patients, parents and other family members frequently have questions about the protocols and process of research and may be reluctant to discuss them with their physician. The oncology-certified nurse has the background and expertise to discuss these questions, provide accurate and comforting information to the patient, and inform physicians when additional clarification and information is needed.

At the end of a research study, when data are analyzed and results are available, the oncology-certified nurse can provide valuable critique of the findings and help to identify clinical implications. Frequently, the content of research publications ends prior to the identification of clinical implications. The oncology-certified nurse assists in interpretation of those findings, especially for nursing

research, and can elaborate on how the findings might apply to changes in clinical practice. Collaborating with other researchers allows oncology-certified nurses to work with medical and nursing researchers, as well as patients in promoting research.

### **CONDUCTING RESEARCH**

Nurses certified at the advanced level can participate in a variety of roles in research studies. They can serve as project directors or managers for implementation of such studies.

These advanced certified nurses are qualified to prepare materials for scientific and ethical reviews; create accrual targets, clinical instruments for data management, and databases for statistical analysis; and provide valid and reliable data. The degree of involvement may vary from one nurse to another depending upon his or her past experience.

When intervention studies include nursing, nurses may be involved in the development, testing, and implementation of the intervention. The complexity of clinical research implementation results in daily problems that can be identified, evaluated, and resolved by advanced certified nurses. These nurses are very familiar with the research process and have frequently participated in one or more studies as co-investigator or project director.

The most complex role for the advanced certified nurse in participating in research is the implementation of pilot or companion studies. In conducting pilot studies, the nurse tests specific aspects or a whole protocol in order to identify what will work under the test study. For example, having patients fill out several questionnaires in a pilot study provides information on how

patients will be found, what setting is available for them to fill out questionnaires, and the length of time involved in completing the questionnaires. These findings are then used to determine whether additional resources are needed, changes in questionnaires should be made, or space problems are present.

Companion studies, on the other hand, accompany nursing or medical studies. This kind of study may involve adding a psychosocial or physical component to an ongoing study. For instance, patients undergoing certain chemotherapy regimens may experience cancer-related fatigue. A companion study comparing two methods of assisting patients to deal with the fatigue may be added to the study. This companion study then uses the parent study data for demographic and treatment information, but generates additional data in relation to the fatigue intervention. The advantage of a companion study is that it capitalizes on an already approved study, can use some of the same data, and can be implemented by the same personnel.

When carrying out these research roles, the advanced certified nurse is also expected to assist in data interpretation and publication. Activities may include presentations at local and national scientific meetings, and publication of results in nursing and medical journals.

More than 8 million people have survived cancer diagnosis and initial treatment. This growing number of cancer survivors reflects the success of cancer research in finding new treatments and in providing supportive therapies. Continuing this successful research approach will occur only if sufficient health care resources are available in the future. ❏

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<sup>2</sup>Bookbinder M, Goldstein M, Derby S, et al. The research connection to quality care in the 21st century: Part I and II. In: Hubbard S, Goodman M, Knobf T, (eds). *Oncology Nursing Updates: Patient Treatment and Support*. 1997;3(5):1-8, 3(6):1-17.

## Nursing Certification

Certification in oncology nursing is strictly voluntary. Nurses seeking certification must successfully complete one of three levels of certification examinations administered by the Oncology Nursing Certification Corporation (ONCC). Administration of the pediatric certification examination by the ONCC will begin in Fall 2000.

In 1999, 16,929 nurses were certified in oncology nursing. Of this number, 16,106 were certified at the basic level and 823 certified at the advanced level.<sup>1</sup>

Qualifications for certification vary for basic, pediatric, and advanced levels.

### Basic-level Certification (OCN®)

- R.N. licensure
- 12 months or more R.N. experience
- 1,000 hours or more current practice in oncology specialty

### Pediatric Certification (CPON)

- R.N. licensure
- 12 months or more R.N. experience
- 1,000 hours or more current practice of pediatric oncology nursing experience

### Advanced-level Certification (AOCN)

- R.N. licensure

- Master's degree or higher in nursing
- 30 months experience as a R.N.
- 2,000 hours or more of oncology nursing experience

The examinations test knowledge of all aspects of oncology care from pre-diagnosis to survivorship and end-of-life care, and include nursing care related to all treatment modalities. Both basic and advanced certifications involve an understanding of basic research principles and competency in various aspects of the research process, with increased depth of research knowledge tested in the advanced examination.

Nurses eligible to become OCN® or AOCN certified can take the test at this year's Oncology Nursing Society Annual Congress on May 10, 2000. The OCN®, AOCN, and CPON Tests will also be administered on Sept. 23, 2000, at 51 locations throughout the U.S.

To receive a free 2000 ONCC Certification Bulletin, which details all test and ONCC-PRO dates, deadlines, fees, and eligibility requirements, contact: Oncology Nursing Certification Corporation, 501 Holiday Drive, Pittsburgh, PA 15220-2749; phone: 412-921-8597; fax: 412-928-0926; e-mail: oncc@ons.org.