

LEADERSHIP & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Oncology Nursing as a Specialty: The Education, Scope, and Standards for Advanced Practice Nursing in Oncology

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Although accounts of cancer nursing practice can be traced to the early part of the 20th century, considerable progress defining cancer nursing was not made until the 1950s (Craytor, 1982), and oncology nursing was not identified as a specialty until the 1960s, when specialty care units were developed in hospitals (Donahue, 1985; Leone, 1965). As the specialty of oncology nursing evolved, so did the role of the advanced practice nurse (APN) in oncology. Cancer nursing education was formalized during the second half of the 20th century. Today, the APN in oncology is a licensed RN with a master's degree, educated in a school of nursing that offers either a graduate program in oncology nursing or graduate-level courses with oncology nursing theoretical and clinical components.

Oncology nursing practice requires that nurses be knowledgeable in a wide range of subject areas, and as the specialty grows, oncology APNs practicing across the country and the world must provide patients and their families with state-of-the-art cancer care. The development of curriculum, as well as educational and practice guidelines, supports the standardization of the education and practice of oncology nurses. The Oncology Nursing Society (ONS) provides specialty organizational support at the national level, and the development of the Oncology Nursing Certification Corporation (ONCC) in 1984 by ONS served to cement the specialization of cancer nursing through the development of certification examinations, including the advanced oncology certified nurse (AOCN®) examination.

Most early efforts to promote graduate education for clinical specialization in cancer nursing were spearheaded by the American Cancer Society (ACS) and the National Cancer Institute, and the first document to provide guidance for the development of a graduate program curriculum for an oncology nursing program, *Master's Degree With a Specialty in Cancer Nursing: Curriculum Guide and Role*

Definition, was published by ACS in 1979. The document outlined recommendations for a master's degree curriculum to educate cancer nurses. ONS joined ACS to revise this document, renamed *The Master's Degree With a Specialty in Oncology Nursing*, in 1986. The third edition, *The Master's Degree With a Specialty in Advanced Practice Oncology Nursing*, was published in 1994, again through the joint efforts of ONS and ACS (ACS & ONS, 1994).

Professional nursing education is the very core of clinical practice, and as oncology nursing evolved as a specialty in the 1970s and '80s, the fact that education extended beyond academic preparation became evident. The *Outcome Standards for Cancer Nursing Education at the Fundamental Level* was published by ONS in 1982, and *Standards of Oncology Nursing Education: Generalist and Advanced Practice Levels* was published in 1989 and revised in 1995 (ONS, 1995). The documents provide educational guidelines for oncology generalist nurses and APNs (including guidelines for professional development and continuing education), educators in clinical settings, and faculty members in schools of nursing.

The American Nurses Association (ANA) published the first formalized standards of nursing practice in 1973. The standards were based on the nursing process and generically addressed the guidelines for determining the quality of nursing care. In 1979, ONS published the *Outcome Standards of Cancer Nursing Practice*, which was followed in 1987 by the *Standards of Oncology Nursing Practice*. ONS and ANA collaborated on the two publications based on the ANA standards of nursing practice. In 1990, ONS published the *Standards of Advanced Practice in Oncology Nursing*, which was one of the first publications by a nursing specialty organization that defined structure, process, and outcome criteria for advanced nursing practice. In 1997, a revision of the 1990 stan-

dards, *Statement on the Scope and Standards of Advanced Practice in Oncology Nursing*, was published (ONS, 1997). Current, evidence-based, nationally recognized guidelines for the education and practice of oncology APNs, maintained through the leadership efforts of ONS, are critical to the future of the specialty.

Standards Revision

Respondents to a survey of APNs identified inconsistency in educational preparation and a need for continuing education support for oncology APNs as significant areas of concern (Murphy-Ende, 2001). Many practice issues also were identified, and retreat project teams were organized to focus their efforts on specific education- and practice-related issues. One of six project teams at the 2001 APN Retreat, identified as the Standards



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Team, was assigned the task of revising three ONS documents that provide guidance for the education and practice of oncology APNs. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the revision process and briefly describe the resulting three documents. The documents that were identified for review and revision were *The Master's Degree With a Specialty in Advanced Oncology Nursing Curriculum Guide*, *Standards of Oncology Nursing Education: Generalist and Advanced Practice Levels*, and *Statement on the Scope and Standards of Advanced Practice in Oncology Nursing*. The revision process occurred over the course of approximately one year.

Process

Each of the APN Retreat team leaders chose six team members from the applications submitted by oncology APNs who applied to attend the retreat. Applicants identified their areas of interest and provided rationale for why they wanted to participate in one of the designated team projects. ONS sponsored the chosen individuals to attend the weekend retreat, and those accepting the invitation made a commitment to work with their assigned project teams through the completion of the project. During the retreat, the Standards Team developed a plan for the revision of each of the assigned documents, constructed a timeline, and developed a brief presentation for the larger group that outlined a plan of action. The process was interesting because team members varied in educational preparation (e.g., clinical nurse specialist [CNS], nurse practitioner [NP], blended role) and came from education and practice settings. The geographic mix of the team members allowed for varied perspectives. Early in the process, the participants realized that strong individual beliefs regarding practice and education would be factors in the revision process.

During retreat sessions, discussion ensued regarding the delegation of work, and the team leader proposed that self-appointed groups of two APNs work on each of the three books. However, after further discussion and heated debate, the group decided that two team members would revise *The Master's Degree With a Specialty in Advanced Oncology Nursing Curriculum Guide* with the help of a third team member who would be primarily responsible for revising the *Standards of Oncology Nursing Education: Generalist and Advanced Practice Levels*. These three team members would work together on the revisions of the two education-focused documents. The remaining three team members were assigned responsibility for revising the *Statement on the Scope and Standards of Advanced Practice in Oncology Nursing*. Before the end of the retreat, a plan of action was developed, including specific tasks to be accomplished for the revision of each document and the timelines involved.

Each of the six Standards Team members had the opportunity to provide input regard-

ing the revisions; consequently, every team member reviewed all three documents. The team leader incorporated any additional changes suggested during the larger team review and made the final revisions to the documents prior to their submission to ONS. ONS was responsible for sending the three revised documents out for field review and for working with the team leader to evaluate the comments made by the field reviewers, and the team leader made the suggested changes to the documents prior to publication.

Outcomes

Group process is an important factor in any project, and the subsequent dynamics can be critical to the success of a project. Philosophic differences regarding role differentiation, APN titling, and the associated clinical practice issues were discussed among team members at the retreat and continued to be a topic of debate during the revision phase of the project for one of the groups. At times, differences of opinion posed a barrier to constructive group process, and the team leader called on members of the ONS leadership group for guidance.

The three publications that were designated for revision were thoroughly and thoughtfully constructed at their inception and had been revised numerous times through a variety of processes by several teams and individuals. Consequently, the Standards Team decided to maintain the existing frameworks, revising the content to more accurately reflect current educational trends and clinical practice.

The Master's Degree With a Specialty in Advanced Practice Oncology Nursing

The Master's Degree With a Specialty in Advanced Practice Oncology Nursing publication provides a historical perspective of oncology nursing education, including the history of oncology advanced nursing practice. It also describes factors that influence nursing practice and education and outlines suggested graduate program characteristics. General curriculum guidelines are provided, and a summary of competencies and course content are recommended for graduate or master's programs that educate oncology nurses in the roles of the CNS and NP, as well as in the CNS/NP blended role. The publication is intended for use by educators developing and revising programs and by prospective students so that they can evaluate and select programs. This curriculum guide provides students and educators with a very general curriculum designed to prepare graduates for varied positions in cancer care settings.

Standards of Oncology Nursing Education: Generalist and Advanced Practice Levels

The *Outcome Standards for Cancer Nursing Education at the Fundamental Level* was

published by ONS in 1982. *The Scope of Advanced Oncology Nursing Practice* developed by the Clinical Practice and Education committees of ONS in 1987 provided the forum for the development of *Standards of Oncology Nursing Education: Advanced Practice Level*. In 1989, the standards were revised and consolidated into one document, *Standards of Oncology Nursing Education: Generalist and Advanced Practice Levels*. A second revision was completed in 1995. The document was revised in conjunction with the master's degree curriculum guide to reflect current educational practices and clinical practice expectations.

The task of revising the school program-related publications began with a database of schools throughout the United States that offer undergraduate content or a master's degree in oncology nursing. A review of the curriculum outlines of these schools provided insight into what needed to be revised. The ONCC blueprint for the AOCN® examination and the current state requirements for titling nurses as APNs and for APN prescriptive privileges also were reviewed. This review revealed that some states recognized AOCN® certification as the requirement for privileges and titling, and a section was added to the master's curriculum book that provided the current state requirements for APN titling with ONCC certification. Revisions to this document also reflected current trends and updated versions of published documents.

The team members who worked on these documents worked well together. No barriers to communication existed, and tasks were completed in a timely fashion. The goal for these documents is to provide educators, clinicians, and prospective students with useful information regarding the necessary information that should be included in a competitive, state-of-the-science oncology educational program.

Statement on the Scope and Standards of Advanced Practice in Oncology Nursing

The *Statement on the Scope and Standards of Advanced Practice in Oncology Nursing* describes the roles and responsibilities of APNs in oncology and the level of care and performance essential to the clinical role of the oncology APN. The standards provide a framework by which the quality of practice and performance can be measured and quantified. This document can be useful for developing job descriptions, describing competency requirements, defining roles, and measuring and evaluating clinical performance. It reflects continued changes in advanced nursing practice in oncology in relation to national healthcare policy and technologic advances. The scope and standards of practice reflect basic ethical and philosophic values of the profession and of ONS. The document articulates the importance of autonomy in practice

as well as in collaborative relationships with other members of the healthcare team. The roles and responsibilities of the oncology APN will continue to evolve with healthcare system and governmental policy changes and with scientific and technologic advances. The scope and standards of practice supported and developed by ONS, the national specialty organization, must remain current to be relevant to oncology APNs and other professionals who use the document.

Scope and Standards of Advanced Practice in Oncology Nursing needs to remain generic because barriers to advanced nursing practice (e.g., prescriptive privileges, certification, reimbursement issues), as well as numerous healthcare setting and collaborative arrangement restrictions, continue to be imposed by national and state regulations.

Disagreement regarding role differences between the CNS and NP posed a significant barrier to effective communication among the team members who worked on the document. Team members debated theoretical and clinical practice differences between the scope and standards of practice of the CNS and NP, and some advocated the need for separate guidelines. ONS leadership maintained that the specialty organization supports that the APN title encompasses the practices of the CNS and NP, and, consequently, the guidelines were revised to reflect APN practice as defined in the literature.

The goal for the document is to provide APNs, administrators, legislators, and others with a clear description of the appropriate and expected scope of the APN's role in oncology, as well as guidelines for advanced clinical practice. Standards for the advanced practice of oncology nursing include structure, process, and outcome criteria to assist in implementation and evaluation of practice.

Conclusions

The scope of oncology advanced nursing practice is broad, encompassing clinical practice, research, education, consultation, and administration. This provides a challenge to academic institutions and faculty to provide comprehensive educational preparation for the various facets of practice. The emergence of new and changing knowledge in biotechnol-

ogy, the molecular processes of cancer, symptom management strategies, and end-of-life care are but a few of the advances in the field of oncology in recent years. Additionally, APN clinical practice issues, including reimbursement and other legal and economic items, also influence curricula content and practice. Many of these evolving trends were identified as learning needs in the ONS APN Survey (Murphy-Ende, 2001). Thus, the goal for updating these three documents was to provide appropriate, current guidelines for structuring educational programs and providing clinical practice guidelines for oncology APNs and, ultimately, excellence in oncology nursing practice.

Academic programs need to be flexible and visionary to optimally prepare oncology nurses for future practice. The incorporation of additional suggested core content into oncology programs can be a daunting task and may require novel strategies to maintain a balance of clinical and scholarship requirements. Graduate oncology programs have the dual challenge to prepare students for specialty practice and meet respective state requirements for credentialing. Such programs must be accredited as educationally sound and include appropriate content and adequate clinical hours; however, the national nursing accrediting bodies are not responsible for approving specialty APN content that is included in graduate programs (Hanson, 1996). This explicates the importance of specialty organization leadership, in this case ONS, overseeing the development and ongoing revisions of master's curriculum guidelines and standards of education for oncology nurses.

The scope of oncology advanced nursing practice integrates medical and nursing paradigms and perspectives that benefit clinical oncology care. It also is the key to the debate around the use of APNs in clinical settings. Oncology APNs must meet the challenges and demands of diverse roles by expanding their knowledge and extending the boundaries of advanced nursing practice, recognizing that the scope of practice is fluid and evolving. Oncology APNs are becoming more autonomous, and accountability is a critical factor in clinical practice. Clear standards for practice

must be maintained based on clinical competency within the scope of practice that has been defined.

ONS provides support for oncology APNs to build and maintain strong national standards for practice through a variety of mechanisms. The Society provides organizational leadership for a host of special teams and projects, including the revision of the educational guidelines, scope, and standards for oncology advanced nursing practice. In addition, ONS- and ACS-sponsored journals and educational programs for oncology nurses, as well as ONS's support for the ONCC national certification examinations, demonstrate the deep commitment that ONS has to oncology advanced nursing practice and the care provided to patients and their families. The work accomplished by the 2001 ONS APN Retreat Standards Team was a valuable contribution to the specialty of oncology nursing.

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