

# Out of Necessity: Oncology Nurses' Experiences Integrating the Internet Into Practice

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**Purpose/Objectives:** To understand the experiences of oncology nurses who use the Internet in their practice when their patients use the Internet for cancer care.

**Research Approach:** Heideggerian hermeneutics branch of phenomenology.

**Setting:** Oncology nurses were interviewed at their practice settings (n = 13), the researcher's office (n = 5), or their homes (n = 2).

**Participants:** 20 nurses recruited from local and national Oncology Nursing Society meetings. Their practice sites were cancer centers, hospitals, clinics, veterans centers, communities, and Internet companies.

**Methodologic Approach:** Data were collected by informal interviews that provided the narrative stories for hermeneutic analysis.

**Main Research Variables:** Internet use for cancer care, nurse-patient relationships, and Internet use for nursing practice.

**Findings:** Five related themes emerged: (a) varying degrees of Internet integration in the practice environment, (b) changing schools of thought, (c) developing Internet use for professional practice, (d) redefining relationships, and (e) new nursing skills. The two constitutive patterns are (a) integrating Internet into practice out of necessity and (b) reflecting historical changes in practice patterns influenced by technology.

**Conclusions:** Nurses who use the Internet are developing new practice patterns that incorporate technology and foster nurse-patient partnerships. Practice environments either foster or hinder technology use. Nurse computer competency is essential.

**Interpretation:** Findings reflect the influence of adapting technology on practice. Internet use is a catalyst for redefining nurse-patient relationships into partnerships. The movement suggests a need for nurse Internet competencies, environmental support, and consideration for patient access (digital divide). Evaluation of content in nursing curricula and of patient competencies is advised. Further research on patient experiences is recommended.

## Key Points . . .

- ▶ Internet use encourages patients' desire for involvement in care decisions.
- ▶ The necessity for nurses' Internet use is patient driven.
- ▶ Nurses' computer competencies influence Internet use, but the institutional culture helps or hinders.
- ▶ Nurses should be aware of the social influence of technology in encouraging partner relationships.

a study of Internet life by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Pew Project) (2002). In addition, 47% of health seekers reported that the information they obtained had a direct effect on the decisions they made about their health care and interactions with healthcare providers. In 2003, the Pew Project reported that the number of health seekers increased to 80% of those online. Nurses increasingly are encountering patients who have searched the Internet for information. In a study of Internet use, Jadad et al. (2001) reported that 100% of physicians, 72% of nurses, and 47% of patients had Internet access and 90% of physicians and nurses reported that patients brought Internet information to them.

In a 10-year review of cancer-related patient education research from 176 synthesized articles, Chelf et al. (2001) reported that patients with cancer sought information when making treatment decisions and managing side effects. Patients preferred obtaining information through discussion with healthcare providers, yet written material supplemented learning. However, Chelf et al. did not evaluate Internet use for obtaining cancer care information.

Information technology offers new ways to deliver health care to patients with cancer (Ehrenberger & Brennan, 1998). In

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Patients and nurses increasingly use the Internet for information and communication (Cobb, 2003); however, little is known about nurses' and patients' actual experiences of using the Internet for cancer care. The aim of this study was to discover the meaning of Internet use by oncology nurses, through phenomenologic interpretation of the narrative stories, to gain an understanding of the common meanings, shared experiences, and practices of oncology nurses who use Internet technology. This knowledge will inform oncology nurses of the value of the Internet as well as the limitations that the technology may impose on their practice. This may facilitate understanding of a technology-based nursing practice.

## Literature Review

In 2002, 52 million Americans (55% of Internet users) used the Internet to obtain health-related information, according to