

Call for Action: Caring for the United States' Aging Cancer Survivors

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The United States is undergoing significant societal shifts that will have profound implications for the professional practice of oncology nurses, including the aging of the nation's baby boomers and an anticipated increase in cancer survivors. Understanding of the confluence of those factors and their impact on survivors' physical and psychological outcomes remains limited. Nurses may be aware of advances in general survivorship care but may not have the specific knowledge and skills to meet the distinctive needs of older adult cancer survivors. The authors call for a paradigm change in nursing practice, which will increase awareness across professional specialties that survivorship care for older adults is a professional obligation of all nurses.

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Several trends in U.S. society are changing oncology nursing practice, education, and research. Two trends highlighted in this article are the aging of the nation's baby boomers (born from 1946–1964) and the move to include survivorship care as part of the cancer continuum (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2012; Rowland, 2008). Both represent the need to increase the care, services, and delivery of survivorship programs tailored to older adults diagnosed with cancer. These trends also increase the demands for oncology nurses to maintain an appropriate level of professional competency in the practice and science of geriatric oncology and cancer survivorship. To establish expertise in those specialties, oncology nurses must commit to ongoing professional development and lifelong learning.

Oncology nurses have met the challenges of changing paradigms in patient care before, as demonstrated by their leadership in advancing the care and science of cancer pain management. In that

paradigm shift, nurses played a vital role in transforming clinical practice to include assessment of pain as a standard of care; developing evidence-based practice guidelines; ensuring increased content on pain management in nursing curricula and professional development programs; and advocating for institutional, regulatory, and national policy changes. The authors call for a systematic and evidence-based approach, similar to the pain management movement, to provide survivorship cancer care specifically designed for adults aged 65 years and older. Expanding the current general model of survivorship care to include a specialty on older adult survivor care would contribute to a better quality of life for the nation's aging survivors.

Aging Baby Boomers

The United States is witnessing a significant increase in older adults. Based on statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau (2002), 40.3 million or 13% of Americans were aged 65 years and older in 2010.

However, that population group has been rapidly increasing since 2000 and will continue to soar. The U.S. Census Bureau (2002) also projected that 70 million or 20% of the total population will be aged 65 years and older by 2030. A major factor contributing to this increase is the aging of baby boomers, with the greatest increase occurring from 2010–2039. Interestingly, the group projected to have the most rapid growth after 2030 is the oldest-old, those 85 and older. People aged 85 years and older are projected to increase from 5.5 million in 2010 to 19 million in 2050 (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2012). In addition, as the older population increases, the racial and ethnic diversity of Americans also will grow, particularly among Asians and Hispanics. These demographic trends will continue as the baby boomer generation reaches this age group, until about 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Therefore, oncology nurses will need educational and clinical preparation to better understand and meet the needs of older adults, including those from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds and those who belong to the oldest-old group.

Aging Cancer Survivors

The increase in older adult cancer survivors is another demographic change that will affect oncology nursing practice. More than 12 million survivors are living in the United States, with at least 50% aged 65 years or older (American Cancer Society, 2012). Factors contributing to the increase in older cancer survivors include advances in oncology care that prolong longevity and increased awareness and participation in the prevention and early detection of chronic diseases.