

Succession Planning in Oncology Nursing: A Professional Must-Have

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The average age of the active nursing force in the United States is approaching 50 years (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Nurses are retiring at a rapid rate; 55% of respondents to one survey indicated a plan to retire in the next seven years (Sverdlik, 2012). Of the survey participants, 13% held an administrative or management position and 44% were aged 55 years or older (Sverdlik, 2012). The age demographic of active oncology nurses mirrors that of the national nursing force. Of the 33,323 active members of the Oncology Nursing Society who indicated an age range on their membership application, 15,735 (47%) self-identified as aged 50 years or older (see Figure 1). At a time when many are planning for retirement, their respective employers are scrambling to fill open positions. With no clear vision or plan in place, many healthcare organizations will struggle to meet the ongoing needs of communities they serve. The challenge is to develop programs that identify, develop, motivate, and transition younger nurses to available positions.

Nurse Development

The October 2010 Institute of Medicine's report on the future of nursing strongly recommended preparing and enabling nurses to be leaders of change in advancing health. Oncology nurses continue to assume increasing levels of responsibility in all care settings. As a result, developing and implementing plans that focus on professional development is critical to addressing challenges oncology nurses will face in the future. Rapid advances in cancer treatment occur on a regular basis, and with an attendant need to maintain a proficient knowledge base, the challenges of providing leadership in the evolving healthcare climate

are staggering. Two key questions must be addressed when contemplating the professional development of oncology nurses: What motivates nurses to aspire to positions of leadership? And what is the best way to prepare those young professionals to become the leaders of tomorrow? The implementation of a carefully developed succession-planning program is a key strategy that may be used for "identifying, educating, training, and mentoring future nurse leaders" (Sverdlik, 2012, p. 383). The current article will review literature on succession planning and discuss the need for all healthcare organizations that care for patients with cancer to have succession plans in place for the development of future oncology nurse leaders.

Literature Review

"Succession planning is a structured process that involves the identification and preparation of a potential successor to assume a new role" (Sverdlik, 2012, p. 383). Growing out of the business world, the idea of succession planning as an essential component of planning in healthcare organizations is slowly gaining traction. Health care in the United States is dealing with an external climate of shrinking margins, internal climates of noncompetitive employee compensation packages, missed opportunities for mentoring and leadership development, and ill-defined career paths, particularly for nursing leaders (Blouin, McDonagh, Neistadt, & Helfand, 2006). Succession planning typically is initiated with the resignation or retirement of a nurse in an administrative position. When organizations have no formal plan for succession, open positions may be filled by nurses who have demonstrated outstanding clinical practice skills but whose leadership skills are unknown. Although that is not inappropriate, the outcome likely

will be nurses who have little or no formal preparation for their new responsibilities. As a result, many new nurse managers struggle with the onslaught of new responsibilities, experience increased stress disproportionate to their position, and ultimately step down to return to clinical nursing. That scenario creates a revolving door of nurse leaders at a time when stability, leadership, and creative thinking are needed to address the myriad of healthcare challenges.

Implementation of an evidence-based management internship that allows staff nurses to explore manager roles is one way to expose interested nurses to leadership opportunities (Wendler, Olson-Sitki, & Prater, 2009). Wendler et al. (2009) described a nurse manager internship program that offered staff nurses the option of exploring leadership roles with the following outcomes: (a) nurses felt nurtured and supported, (b) staff nurses saw the bigger picture outside of their own work environment, (c) nurses learned how to demonstrate care and understanding toward staff while setting expectations for performance, (d) nurses learned effective communication skills, and (e) nurse managers engaged in their own ongoing professional development while serving as mentors in the program. That type of program could be established in a variety of oncology care settings, from acute inpatient care to outpatient clinics. A key component of any succession-planning program is formal support from the parent organization, including a commitment of resources to support the direct patient-care role while nurses participate in the program.

Strategies geared toward succession planning must include initiatives that focus on nurses in roles other than administrative. For example, advanced-practice nurses such as clinical nurse specialists and nurse practitioners (NPs) must participate in the development and

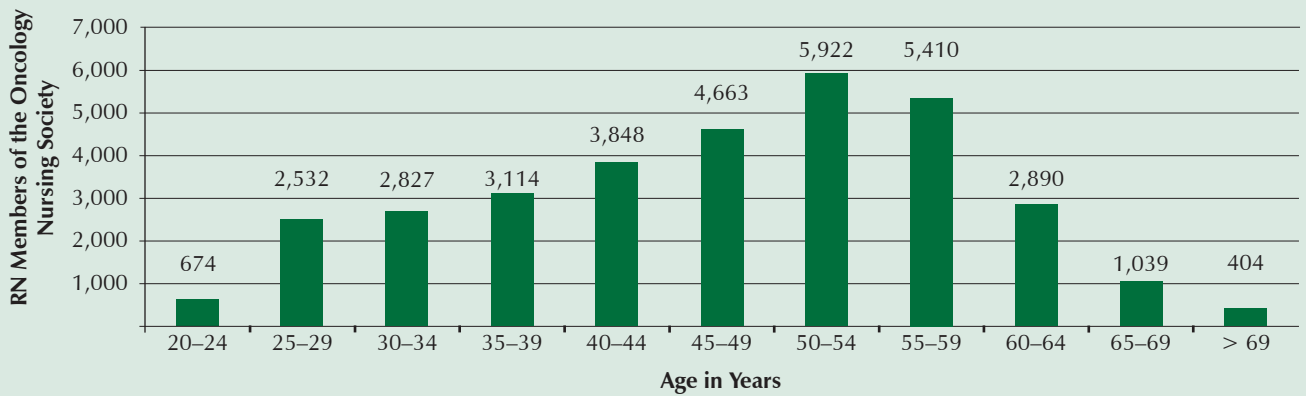


Figure 1. Age of Oncology Nursing Society RN Membership in 2012

Note. Based on information from Oncology Nursing Society, 2012.

implementation of succession-planning programs that will recruit, mentor, and otherwise support younger nurses who are interested in those specialized nursing roles. Instead of a more traditional master's program that prepares nurses to work as clinical nurse specialists, many academic programs focus on the Doctorate of Nursing Practice (DNP) as the educational preparation for NPs. Therefore, the need to expand the DNP program curricula to embrace educational preparation for other advanced-practice nursing roles is imperative. Oncology nurses working in advanced-practice roles are uniquely situated to exert influence on their respective employers to ensure that appropriate succession planning occurs to support highly specialized nursing positions.

Any discussion of succession planning in oncology nursing must acknowledge that, to have a successful program, new nurses must be recruited and retained by healthcare organizations. Many hospitals have developed specialized residency or internship programs designed to assist new graduate nurses in the transition to professional practice, "Nurse residency programs appear to lead to better retention rates as well as increased competencies, confidence, socialization, and satisfaction of new nurses" (Childress & Gorder, 2012, p. 341). Developing formal nurse residencies or internship programs in comprehensive cancer centers would help to ensure that an appropriate supply of nurses have the skills and knowledge needed to work in oncology nursing. Nurses who complete that type of program will have a strong foundation in oncology care and the opportunity

to appreciate a broad view of the challenges that face patients navigating an increasingly complex healthcare system. Those nurses also will be moved to a structured succession program designed to help them assume the leadership position of their choosing.

Recommendations for the Future

The literature has focused on the development of leaders in nursing management and the critical need for structured succession planning for their development, primarily in acute care hospitals (Adams, 2011; Cathcart & Greenspan, 2012; Sverdlik, 2012). Nursing leadership can begin in any setting; the assumption that succession planning only must be done for nursing administrative positions misses the point entirely. Organizations that care for patients with cancer must invest the resources needed to recruit, retain, sustain, develop, and mentor nurses at all levels of responsibility. Although organizations must replace key nursing administrative positions, the ongoing professional development of all nurses is critical to improving patient outcomes and satisfaction.

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