

# Prelicensure Nursing Students' Attitudes Toward Patients With Cancer Revisited

Tracy A. Ruegg, PhD, ANP-BC, AOCN®, Kawther Hamash, PhD, RN, and Sherry A. Burrell, PhD, RN, CNE

Recruiting graduate nurses into oncology practice postgraduation continues to be challenging. Graduate nurses tend to prefer clinical settings that they consider high-tech or challenging, with oncology ranking low. In addition, new oncology nurses have the highest turnover rate among all cancer clinicians. Higher cancer incidence rates and advances in cancer treatments have increased the demand for oncology nurses. Because of these challenges, this study sought to explore undergraduate nursing students' attitudes toward oncology nursing, describe factors influencing their preferred practice setting for employment, and examine the correlation between these factors.

## AT A GLANCE

- Family members and nursing mentors are the main influences on nursing students' field choice.
- Students who felt prepared to care for a patient with cancer were more likely to be aged older, be further along in their studies, be enrolled in a nursing program with an oncology course, have previously cared for a patient with cancer, and report that their nursing program prepared them to care for a patient with cancer.
- Increasing awareness among prelicensure faculty about developing a dedicated oncology nursing course is essential.

## KEYWORDS

prelicensure nursing student; attitudes; oncology; cancer; education; preparation

## DIGITAL OBJECT IDENTIFIER

10.1188/24.CJON.220-226

Recruitment of graduate nurses into oncology practice remains challenging. Prelicensure nursing students continue to rank oncology as one of the lowest clinical specialties for desired employment after graduation (Smiley et al., 2023). According to a workforce survey by the National Council of State Boards of Nursing, oncology as a specialty has ranked below the critical care, medical or surgical, women's health and maternity, emergency, perioperative, and pediatric fields for the past seven years (Smiley et al., 2023). As an alternative, new nurses opt for clinical practice settings that they consider high-tech or challenging, or what society perceives as exciting (van Iersel et al., 2016; Wilkinson et al., 2016).

Several factors have been identified as influences on new graduates' preference for a clinical practice specialty. These factors include educational preparation, positive student experiences or situations, and employment support. In addition, entertainment and social media perpetuate students' desire to work in fast-paced or curative environments (Wilkinson et al., 2016).

Published literature cites the aging population, workplace violence, the aging nursing workforce, nurse burnout, family obligations, and a lack of nurse educators as critical factors contributing to the ever-growing shortage of nursing professionals. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated nurses leaving the profession (Haddad et al., 2023). The shortage of nurses in the oncology setting is even more dire because new nurses often leave the workforce sooner and exhibit higher turnover rates than other cancer clinicians (Challinor et al., 2020). A lack of oncology nursing content taught in the prelicensure nursing curriculum is another common reason cited for students not selecting oncology for employment. For example, a nursing curriculum containing insufficient principles related to cancer prevention, screening, and treatment has been shown to have negative consequences on the nursing workforce (Lockhart et al., 2020). In comparison, an undergraduate curriculum containing adequate oncology content can increase student interest in the specialty (Hedenstrom et al., 2021; Komprood, 2013). Qualitative research has demonstrated that nursing students expressed a lack of preparation and communication as well as anxiety when caring for patients with cancer because of learning insufficient theoretical caring principles (Charalambous & Kaite, 2013). Similarly, Alrasheedi et al. (2021) found that only personal self-efficacy predicted intention to work with patients with cancer over knowledge variables. In addition, nurses trained in the specific needs of patients with