From the United States to Southern Ireland: Translating the Role of Oncology Advanced Practice Nurse

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In the summer of 2001, the authors had a unique opportunity to attend graduate nursing courses in the United States after they took on the responsibility to design the first Advanced Nurse Practitioner Programme (Oncology Nursing) in southern Ireland and begin its operation in September 2001. The experience was called “shadowing” because the authors closely followed American mentors. This article outlines the relationship between advanced practice in southern Ireland and the United States and describes some of the authors’ observations and experiences.

Background on Advanced Practice Nursing

According to Hamric (1996), advanced practice nursing is the application of an expanded range of practical, theoretical, and research-based therapeutics to phenomena experienced by patients within a special clinical area of the larger discipline of nursing. The term “therapeutics” refers to any of the activities undertaken as part of delivering care and includes assessment, diagnosis, planning, intervention and treatment, and evaluation (Hamric, 2000). Advanced practice nursing is grounded in the theory and practice of nursing. It incorporates nursing research, research from related disciplines, and management and leadership theories to form a basis for a multidisciplinary approach to quality patient care (National Council for the Professional Development of Nursing and Midwifery [NCNM], 2001). The authors referred to this definition of advanced practice nursing as they evaluated how it is implemented in the United States and how it could be implemented in Ireland.

Emergence of the Role in the United States

The advanced practice nursing role emerged in the United States in response to the advances in healthcare requirements and changing social and economic realities of limited healthcare resources, rising healthcare costs of an aging population, and rising healthcare needs. The role reflects professional nursing’s effort to fulfill its commitment to providing patients with cost-effective, quality care. It has evolved steadily over the past century, and its development is one part of the ongoing evolution of professional nursing (Keane & Angstadt, 1999).

Advanced Practice Nursing in Southern Ireland

Comprehensive, individualized, and holistic care is not new to oncology nursing in southern Ireland. However, advanced practice nursing in the context of cancer care is a new concept. With the new role came expanded practice opportunities for oncology nurses. Recent developments in cancer care, such as the use of genetic predisposition testing, expanding information technology, and the use of complementary therapies, brought opportunities and challenges for oncology nurses in Ireland (Spross & Heaney, 2000).

As in the United States, people with cancer in Ireland are living longer and face issues related to long-term survival and the social implications of living with chronic disease. Oncology nurses in southern Ireland have risen to the challenge to provide expert advanced care to patients with cancer and their families.

The National Cancer Strategy in Ireland (National Cancer Services Strategy Commission, 1996) has identified the following objectives that apply to advanced practice oncology nursing. The Commission on Nursing (1998) recommended that a career pathway be developed for nurses in Ireland leading from registration after basic training through clinical specialization to advanced practice. The establishment of this clinical career pathway was assigned to NCNM and applied to cancer care.

Continued professional development through formal education is essential if nursing is to meet the objectives identified by the National Cancer Strategy. NCNM determined that a master’s degree program would be the most efficient and effective way to prepare advanced practice oncology nurses. A program was suggested that provided advanced training for nurses to serve four functions: autonomous clinical practitioner, expert practitioner, pioneering professional leader, and researcher (NCNM, 2001).

Autonomous clinical practitioner: Autonomous advanced practice oncology nurses are accountable and responsible for an advanced level of decision making and the management of a specific patient caseload. The crucial factor in determining advanced practice nursing is the level of decision making and responsibility rather than the nature or difficulty of the tasks undertaken by practitioners.

Expert practitioner: Expert practitioners must demonstrate practical and theoretical knowledge and critical thinking skills that are acknowledged as exemplary by their peers. In addition, they must be able to articulate and justify the concept of advanced practice.

Pioneering professional leader: Advanced practice oncology nurses are pioneers, visionaries, and clinical leaders in that they initiate and implement changes in healthcare service in response to patient needs and service demands. Advanced practice nurses participate in educating nursing staff and other healthcare professionals through role modeling, mentoring, sharing, and facilitating learning.