Oncology Nursing as a Specialty: The Education, Scope, and Standards for Advanced Practice Nursing in Oncology

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Although accounts of cancer nursing practice can be traced to the early part of the 20th century, considerable progress defining cancer nursing was not made until the 1950s (Craytor, 1982), and oncology nursing was not identified as a specialty until the 1960s, when specialty care units were developed in hospitals (Donahue, 1985; Leone, 1965). As the specialty of oncology nursing evolved, so did the role of the advanced practice nurse (APN) in oncology. Cancer nursing education was formalized during the second half of the 20th century. Today, the APN in oncology is a licensed RN with a master’s degree, educated in a school of nursing that offers either a graduate program in oncology nursing or graduate-level courses with oncology nursing theoretical and clinical components.

Oncology nursing practice requires that nurses be knowledgeable in a wide range of subject areas, and as the specialty grows, oncology APNs practicing across the country and the world must provide patients and their families with state-of-the-art cancer care. The development of curriculum, as well as educational and practice guidelines, supports the standardization of the education and practice of oncology nurses. The Oncology Nursing Society (ONS) provides specialty organizational support at the national level, and the development of the Oncology Nursing Certification Corporation (ONCC) in 1984 by ONS served to cement the specialization of oncology nurses. The Oncology Nursing Society (ONS) established the Oncology Nursing Certification Corporation (ONCC) in 1984 by ONS served to cement the specialization of oncology nurses.

The American Nurses Association (ANA) published the first formalized standards of nursing practice in 1973. The standards were based on the nursing process and generically addressed the guidelines for determining the quality of nursing care. In 1979, ONS published the Outcome Standards of Cancer Nursing Practice, which was followed in 1987 by the Standards of Oncology Nursing Practice. ONS and ANA collaborated on the two publications based on the ANA standards of nursing practice. In 1990, ONS published the Standards of Advanced Practice in Oncology Nursing, which was one of the first publications by a nursing specialty organization that defined structure, process, and outcome criteria for advanced nursing practice. In 1997, a revision of the 1990 standards, Statement on the Scope and Standards of Advanced Practice in Oncology Nursing, was published (ONS, 1997).}

Standards Revision

Respondents to a survey of APNs identified inconsistency in educational preparation and a need for continuing education support for oncology APNs as significant areas of concern (Murphy-Ende, 2001). Many practice issues also were identified, and retreat project teams were organized to focus their efforts on specific education- and practice-related issues. One of six project teams at the 2001 APN Retreat, identified as the Standards Revision Task Force.

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