The Life Cycle of the Oncology Nurse: Do We Know What We Need to Know?

In the first years of my tenure as editor of the Oncology Nursing Forum, I had the opportunity to edit a supplement to the September 1994 issue that contained articles based on research sponsored by the Oncology Nursing Society (ONS) on the life cycle of an oncology nurse. This qualitative research project of 38 oncology nurses struck a cord for many of us at the time. The experience was a bit like looking in a mirror and seeing a familiar reflection. The results of the research validated things that we believed to be true and fairly consistent about what it meant to be an oncology nurse, what attracted us to our jobs, and how we took care of ourselves. Except for role delineation studies, we have not looked at ourselves as oncology nurses in almost 13 years.

As I have noted a number of times in recent editorials, we have been hearing a great deal about the “new” generation of nurses, the nursing shortage and our difficulties overcoming the problems, and the graying of America and our current nursing pool. It seems to me that we are making a great many assumptions and drawing a good number of conclusions about the issues without really knowing what our current nursing profile is like and what we might reasonably expect the next generation to need or want.

The focus of the life cycle research was near and dear to me. As a young new oncology nurse in mid-1970s, I was one of five nurse colleagues in Los Angeles, CA, who decided to “do a research project.” The study was a rather involved and comprehensive descriptive survey of oncology nurses. We asked a huge number of questions and then persuaded a graduate student in statistics to help us figure out the results. For all but one of us, it was our first exposure to designing a research project. Although we were successful in gathering a large amount of data, the fact that we skipped some crucial steps in the process eventually resulted in a negative result when we finally were able to craft and submit an article. The quantitative information we gathered was consistent with the results of the life cycle research, and it gave me a great deal of pleasure to be able to participate in the final editing of those manuscripts.

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