Working Through Grief and Loss: Oncology Nurses’ Perspectives on Professional Bereavement

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The global demand for highly skilled, experienced oncology nurses continues to grow because of increased disease incidence and improved cancer survivorship. However, predicted oncology workforce shortages may negatively affect both the quantity and quality of cancer care, including related areas such as research, healthcare access, and survivorship in the 21st century. To date, staff and faculty shortages have decreased the number of nurses receiving specialized oncology education and training (Institute of Medicine, 2009).

In spite of growing evidence that experienced oncology nurses contribute to high-quality cancer care and improved patient outcomes, administrators in oncology settings commonly face multiple challenges to nurse retention, including inadequate staffing levels, high patient acuity requiring complex care delivery, and long work hours (Buerhaus, Donelan, DesRoches, Lamkin, & Mallory, 2001). Caring relationships fostered by oncology nurses also may be associated with emotional burden (Showalter, 2010; Walton & Alvarez, 2010; Yoder-Mallory, 2001). Caring relationships fostered by oncology nurses also may be associated with emotional burden (Showalter, 2010; Walton & Alvarez, 2010; Yoder-Mallory, 2001).

Support issues were numerous, multilevel, and varied. However, addressing those concerns can improve job satisfaction and decrease compassion fatigue. The findings lay the foundation for appropriate interventions to assist nurses in managing those situations.

Interpretation: Administrators, managers, and individuals interested in furthering the multifaceted goals of oncology care, including nurses themselves, are challenged to create and maintain mutually supportive environments for providing optimal care to patients and families.