

Oncology Certification: What Is in It for You?

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Most nurses are confident in their belief that they provide excellent care; however, many find the idea of taking an examination to demonstrate their knowledge frightening. Earning a specialty certification is one of the most important accomplishments a nurse can achieve for oneself, one's patients, and one's employer, as it signifies knowledge and practice competency in the specialty (Oncology Nursing Certification Corporation [ONCC], 2008c). This column explains the benefits of certification and solutions to potential barriers to obtaining certification for oncology nurses who are contemplating certification.

Certification is a voluntary personal and professional accomplishment that is recognized by patients, their families, peers, other health professionals, and employers. Specialty certification is not limited to health professions; it exists in other occupations such as business, accounting,

More than 2.9 million people in the United States are RNs (American Nurses Association, 2008). More than 500,000 nurses worldwide are certified in their specialty areas, including advanced practice nurses who have more than one specialty credential (American Board of Nursing Specialties, 2005). ONCC was established in 1984 to develop and administer a certification program in oncology nursing. It currently offers five certification examinations (ONCC, 2008c) (see Table 1). Currently, more than 27,000 nurses are certified, including 23,378 nurses with the OCN® credential, 1,731 CPON®, 1,225 AOCN®, 541 AOCNP®, and 220 AOCNS® (ONCC, 2008c).

Since the 1990s, healthcare organizations have placed a higher value on specialty certification for nurses. Many employers now provide and pay for review courses for their employees. Some employers even reimburse their staff for the cost of successful completion of the credentialing examination. The increase in the number of healthcare organizations supporting nurses' professional development via specialty certification may be partly because of the criteria for Magnet recognition from the American Nurses Credentialing Center (2008), which strongly encourages specialty certification to validate specialty nursing knowledge.

Personal and Professional Benefits of Certification

Earning specialty certification is a personal achievement that is positively associated with greater nurse job satisfaction, a higher degree of accountability, and increased confidence in decision making (Stromborg et al., 2005). In a survey of nurse managers conducted by the American Board of Nursing Specialties, 86% of nurse managers preferred to hire certified nurses over noncertified nurses when everything else was equal (Stromborg et al.). The nurse managers believed that certified nurses have a validated knowledge in their specialty areas and a greater professional commitment to learning. Many respondents also viewed certified nurses as informal and formal leaders, better preceptors and mentors for others, and more likely to serve on unit- and/or hospitalwide committees.

Certification is a desired characteristic for many employers. Certification increases one's marketability and helps one to move toward his or her professional goals. Obtaining specialty certification can position one to apply for clinical and leadership positions that can move one toward personal and professional excellence (Stromborg et al., 2005).

Leak and Spruill (2008) surveyed nurses at an academic medical center

"Certification has been a personal challenge for me. It has helped validate my skills and knowledge in care of oncology patients. It was worth my time and energy to take the test" (Leak and Spruill, 2008).

and information technology. Obtaining a formal credential—Oncology Certified Nurse (OCN®), Certified Breast Care Nurse (CBCN), Certified Pediatric Oncology Nurse (CPON®), Advanced Oncology Clinical Nurse Specialist (AOCNS®), or Advanced Oncology Certified Nurse Practitioner (AOCNP®)—is not only an achievement, but a validation of the nurse's clinical experience and knowledge.

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