

## FEATURE ARTICLE

# Treating One of Our Own

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As a group, oncology nurses are aging, mirroring a large portion of the American public. Many practicing nurses are approaching middle age, and with increased age comes an increased risk for cancer. Many oncology nurses are cancer survivors, and the experience of treating a colleague is becoming more common, but few publications have addressed this topic. Pennsylvania Oncology Hematology Associates (POHA), a private medical oncology practice in Philadelphia, has encountered such a situation. This article captures the experience of one oncology nurse who underwent chemotherapy treatment for breast cancer at her place of employment. She discusses her cancer, chemotherapy treatments, and new level of understanding with patients. Her colleagues also share their reactions to witnessing the survivorship process. The nursing team at POHA has been inspired and humbled by the experience, and patient care has been enhanced. The courage of one individual's journey has demonstrated how a negative situation can be transformed into a positive one.

Oncology nurses, like all nurses in America, are aging along with a large percentage of the American public. Just as the baby-boomer generation reaches middle age, most actively practicing nurses are reaching the same milestone. Increased age also brings an increased risk for cancer (Schmidt-Luggen, 2000; Spratley, Johnson, Sochalski, Fritz, & Spencer, 2000). Many oncology nurses are cancer survivors (Picard, Agretelis, & DeMarco, 2004); therefore, the experience of treating a colleague is becoming more common. This article will describe the experience of members of a chemotherapy unit who administered chemotherapy to a colleague with breast cancer and worked alongside her on the days of her treatment. By relaying the experience, including its challenges and rewards, the authors hope to help other oncology nurses who most certainly will face a similar situation in the future.

## Review of the Literature

Scant professional literature addressing the experiences of nurses who are cancer survivors is available; however, the *Oncology Nursing Forum* published a two-part article regarding professional and personal experiences with cancer. In Part I, DeMarco, Picard, and Agretelis (2004) discussed personal nursing experiences and how profession influenced survivorship. Using an interview process, the phenomenologic study delved into the lives of 25 RNs with cancer. DeMarco et al. concluded that nurses were more aware of the possibility of developing cancer because of their increased knowledge of medicine, but that understanding was not acknowledged in their care. Part II of the article was based on the same patient population as the first, but Picard et al. (2004) emphasized the professional effects of being a patient. The re-

### At a Glance

- ◆ Treating a coworker with cancer is rare, yet as the nursing workforce ages and cancer risk increases, this experience may become more common.
- ◆ Treating a coworker in her place of employment can have a significantly positive effect on other patients because of her ability to share the experience.
- ◆ The experiences of nurses who are cancer survivors need to be explored and documented.

searchers noted that the healthcare community is responsible for investigating and responding to the needs of its colleagues. Several common themes were identified among the nurses: (a) Individualized support from colleagues allowed the nurses to balance work, life, and treatments and (b) healthcare professionals can advance

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