

# LEADERSHIP & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ellen Giarelli, EdD, RN, CS, CRNP  
Terry A. Throckmorton, RN, PhD  
Associate Editors

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

Linda A. Jacobs, PhD, CRNP, AOCN®, BC, Raymond Scarpa, MA, CNS, AOCN®,  
Joanne Lester, MSN, RNC, CNP, AOCN®, and Julia Smith, MSN, ANP-BC

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 cancer nursing through the development of certification examinations, including the advanced oncology certified nurse (AOCN®) examination.

Most early efforts to promote graduate education for clinical specialization in cancer nursing were spearheaded by the American Cancer Society (ACS) and the National Cancer Institute, and the first document to provide guidance for the development of a graduate program curriculum for an oncology nursing program, *Master's Degree With a Specialty in Cancer Nursing: Curriculum Guide and Role*

*Definition*, was published by ACS in 1979. The document outlined recommendations for a master's degree curriculum to educate cancer nurses. ONS joined ACS to revise this document, renamed *The Master's Degree With a Specialty in Oncology Nursing*, in 1986. The third edition, *The Master's Degree With a Specialty in Advanced Practice Oncology Nursing*, was published in 1994, again through the joint efforts of ONS and ACS (ACS & ONS, 1994).

Professional nursing education is the very core of clinical practice, and as oncology nursing evolved as a specialty in the 1970s and '80s, the fact that education extended beyond academic preparation became evident. The *Outcome Standards for Cancer Nursing Education at the Fundamental Level* was published by ONS in 1982, and *Standards of Oncology Nursing Education: Generalist and Advanced Practice Levels* was published in 1989 and revised in 1995 (ONS, 1995). The documents provide educational guidelines for oncology generalist nurses and APNs (including guidelines for professional development and continuing education), educators in clinical settings, and faculty members in schools of nursing.

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 stan-

dards, *Statement on the Scope and Standards of Advanced Practice in Oncology Nursing*, was published (ONS, 1997). Current, evidence-based, nationally recognized guidelines for the education and practice of oncology APNs, maintained through the leadership efforts of ONS, are critical to the future of the specialty.

### 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



Linda A. Jacobs, PhD, CRNP, AOCN®, BC, is a program coordinator of the *Living Well After Cancer Program* at the University of Pennsylvania Cancer Center and a clinical assistant professor in the School of Nursing at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia; Raymond Scarpa, MA, CNS, AOCN®, is an advanced practice nurse of head and neck oncology at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey in Newark; Joanne Lester, MSN, RNC, CNP, AOCN®, is an oncology nurse practitioner in the Comprehensive Breast Health Center in the James Cancer Hospital and Solove Research Institute at the Ohio State University in Columbus; and Julia Smith, MSN, ANP-BC, is an instructor in the Adult Oncology Advanced Practice Nurse Program in the School of Nursing at Yale University in New Haven, CT.

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