



Professional Development for Oncology Nurses: A Commitment to Lifelong Learning

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Think back to the day you graduated from your entry-level nursing program. The feelings we experienced at that time are likely universal, whether that day was one year ago or more than 40 years ago. No more tests, no more papers, no more clinical skills practice, and no more preparing the dreaded nursing care plan. School was finished. We all looked forward to passing our nursing boards and getting our first real nursing jobs. Certainly, we all had some vague idea that during our life as nurses we would, at some time, have to learn a new skill, or work with a new type of equipment; however, many of us did not seriously contemplate or acknowledge that we were embarking on a career path that expected us to be lifelong learners. Little did we know that engaging in the process of lifelong learning is not necessarily something that comes naturally; it is, in fact, a personal commitment that each of us makes to the pursuit of learning throughout our professional career.

In 2012, the Oncology Nursing Society (ONS) published a position paper on lifelong learning for oncology nurses in the *Oncology Nursing Forum (ONF)* (ONS, 2012). Embracing the Institute of Medicine (IOM, 2010) report, ONS (2012) stated that nurses must engage in “continuous professional development, advanced nursing education, and the development of interprofessional models of care” (p. 127). ONS recognized that although the basic principles of oncology nursing remain unchanged, new and improved trends in models of care delivery, the rapidly changing science and technology of cancer care, and published data from nursing research and clinical trials created knowledge domains, which demanded that oncology nurses remain current to provide quality patient

care (ONS, 2012). At that time, ONS also called for collaboration among various groups engaged in the training of nurses and the provision of health care to ensure that lifelong learning was encouraged and the ongoing needs of the nursing work force were met.

The idea of lifelong learning is something all professional nurses must embrace to lead change and improve health (IOM, 2010). The ONS position paper determined 12 behaviors that oncology nurses should demonstrate to meet the professional expectations of a lifelong learner (see Figure 1). The challenge is to identify opportunities as well as develop and implement methods or strategies aimed at supporting oncology nurses in the pursuit of meeting those expectations.

Journal Club

Journal clubs have been in use since 1875 and have served multiple purposes over the years (Duffy, Thompson, Hobbs, Niemeyer-Hackett, & Elpers, 2011). The journal club format can help educate students, support staff nurse skill development, promote evidence-based practice and interprofessional collaboration, and introduce staff nurses to the exciting world of nursing research. Journal clubs have become a well-recognized and established method used to foster and support the excitement of lifelong learning. Journal clubs are an effective way to share current subject matter knowledge with nurses, and also provide a platform to help nurses evaluate the value of this knowledge and its potential application to their clinical setting (Duffy et al., 2011).

When well organized, a successful journal club has a dedicated leader and is focused on current, relevant nursing issues (Duffy et al., 2011). At the University

of Arizona Medical Center–University Campus, the clinical nurse specialist (CNS) on the gynecologic oncology surgical unit has organized and led a highly active interprofessional journal club for several years. The CNS selects several related nursing articles on a pre-selected topic each month and provides them to the unit staff in advance of the journal club meeting. Topics selected for discussion often are related to quality measures or outcomes monitored on the unit or on evidence-based practice (EBP) relevant to the unit’s patient population. Monthly meetings are facilitated by the CNS and attendees are encouraged to freely discuss the article content, question methods used in the research or EBP to gain understanding of the strength of the evidence presented, and evaluate the results for relevance and application to the nursing care on their unit. The atmosphere is relaxed and participants are learning is encouraged and supported.

Articles for discussion are selected from many relevant sources. *ONF* highlights one research article in each publication that is appropriate for use in journal club discussion. The emphasis is on evaluating relevant nursing research and translating the findings to clinical practice, education, or administration. Questions are suggested that can be used to initiate the discussion, and permission to photocopy the article for use also is provided. Another source available for use is the *Clinical Journal of Oncology Nursing (CJON)*. *CJON* focuses on providing information to practicing oncology nurses promoting quality care for patients with cancer and families across the care continuum. Each issue of *CJON* offers a dedicated journal club article that focuses on a timely, relevant topic in cancer nursing.

It is the position of the Oncology Nursing Society that all oncology nurses engage in lifelong learning by

- ▶ **Seeking** opportunities that promote lifelong learning and professional advancement from entry level to practice through their careers.
- ▶ **Conducting** ongoing self-assessment of learning needs through a variety of methods, including self-reflection and feedback from peers, employers, and colleagues.
- ▶ **Continually seeking** opportunities that promote learning and advancement of skills in the science and practice of oncology nursing, technology, economics, and healthcare trends.
- ▶ **Creating, engaging, and leading** innovative approaches to learning for nurse learners, which may include distance learning models, use of technologic modalities for content delivery, e-learning, internships, and residency programs.
- ▶ **Pursuing, obtaining, and maintaining** specialty certification in oncology nursing.
- ▶ **Engaging** in assessing, attaining, and maintaining competency in the practice of oncology nursing through a variety of methods such as testing, simulation, cases studies, and e-learning.
- ▶ **Leading** innovative practice change in the specialty of oncology nursing through evidence-based practice, research, quality improvement, and education.
- ▶ **Precepting, coaching, and mentoring** nurses.
- ▶ **Partnering** with physicians and other healthcare providers to lead change, foster critical thinking, develop innovative care models, and contribute to the delivery of quality cancer care.
- ▶ **Influencing and shaping** health policy as it relates to the healthcare environment through participation in legislative activities and advocacy initiatives.
- ▶ **Sharing** knowledge and skills by participating in the oncology education of nurses and other members of the healthcare team through various methods such as presentations, conferences, in-services, journal clubs, and e-learning.
- ▶ **Advancing** the science, art, and practice of oncology nursing through scholarly and volunteer work such as authorship, publications, lectureship, advocacy, and community and board service.

Figure 1. Behaviors Demonstrating Lifelong Learning in Oncology Nurses

Note. From "Lifelong Learning for Professional Oncology Nurses," by Oncology Nursing Society, 2012, *Oncology Nursing Forum*, 39, p. 127. Copyright 2013 by the Oncology Nursing Society. Reprinted with permission.

Certification

Another method available to oncology nurses that supports and demonstrates a commitment to lifelong learning is the process of nursing specialty certification. Certification is the outward formal recognition of oncology nurses' experience, specialized knowledge, and skills. Certification is a voluntary process signifying that the oncology nurse has a level of experience and knowledge in cancer care beyond that expected of an entry level nurse. The certification examinations in oncology nursing are based on current best professional practice and serve as a validation that the certified nurse is up to date with the available knowledge in his or her field.

"Promoting, obtaining, and maintaining specialty certification in oncology nursing" was identified by ONS (2012, p. 127) as one of the expected behaviors for oncology nurses engaged in lifelong learning. To maintain certification, nurses must dedicate themselves to achieving expected and specified standards for the promotion of quality outcomes in cancer care; a commitment, in effect, to lifelong learning (Oncology Nursing Certification Corporation, 2013).

Writing for Publication

Another opportunity available to oncology nurses in support of lifelong

learning is writing an article for publication. Nurses who are committed to lifelong learning have a responsibility to share their knowledge and skills with others. Advancing the art and practice of oncology nursing through authorship benefits both the writer and the reader (Mee, 2001).

According to Mee (2001), all nurses have the potential and foundation to be authors. For oncology nurses who are interested in writing but do not know how to start, *CJON* offers mentoring from experienced authors and provides guidelines to assist in the process. *ONF* provides support on manuscript preparation for oncology nurses who are engaged in research and want to report on their findings (Berkey & Moore, 2012). Mentorship in the writing process is available to any oncology nurse who wants to share the knowledge they have with others in the profession. Many healthcare organizations provide informal, yet structured, support for nurses who wish to write through groups (e.g., shared leadership councils, staff development departments).

Local Chapters

As a large, national professional organization, ONS strives to promote a sense of community among its nurse members. Membership in local ONS chapters affords oncology nurses the

opportunity to develop a sense of community that promotes the values of the national organization and supports the professional development of the oncology nurse leaders of the future.

ONS local chapters support oncology nurses in the pursuit of lifelong learning by providing education opportunities, support member attendance at national meetings, and offer scholarships to nurses pursuing additional formal education. Chapters provide nurses with opportunities to be leaders in their community, network with professionals, and tackle challenges that are shared among colleagues. By sharing knowledge and skills, chapter members support lifelong learning and professional development by participating in the education of nurse colleagues.

The Future

Nurses are leaders in health care whether at the bedside, in administrative positions, or in academia. The evolving healthcare system demands that nurses are committed to the pursuit of lifelong learning as a means of meeting professional and societal expectations. No where is this more true than in the field of oncology nursing. The challenge for many nurses is finding a way to rekindle and nurture the learning habits possessed as nursing students.

Individual professional development starts when nurses acknowledge that they must be a lifelong learner. If we don't approach our own professional development as a lifelong learner, we risk becoming addicted to quick fixes rather than supporting long-term change (Fleming, 2013). Professional development is not just solving today's deficiency, but sustaining a lifetime of improvement and excellence, which takes the dedication of continuous, lifelong learning (Fleming, 2013).

"Lifelong learning enables oncology nurses to stay informed of scientific advances and research, lead and practice nursing research and evidenced-based nursing, and attain and maintain competency in the specialty of oncology nursing to provide safe, effective, and quality care to patients with cancer and their caregivers" (ONS, 2012, p. 127). The opportunities presented in this article are not an all-inclusive or exhaustive

list because the methods and strategies available to pursue additional education or skill development are nearly limitless. Nurses must continue to seek out and actively participate in activities that promote lifelong learning.

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