

The Role of the Oncology Nurse in Cancer Genetic Counseling

The identification of genes that, when altered (mutated), are associated with cancer development is transforming our understanding of and approach to the detection and management of cancer. As genetic technology evolves and knowledge of cancer genetics expands, healthcare providers respond by informing patients, families, and the public about the implications of these developments for cancer prevention, early detection, and treatment. Ultimately, the genetic revolution will have an impact on the entire specialty of oncology nursing.

It Is the Position of ONS That

- The rapid integration of advances in cancer genetics will require increased numbers of individuals educated in genetics and cancer care.
- Oncology nurses at both the general and advanced practice levels must have educational preparation in the principles of human genetics.
- Oncology nurses are well suited to assume expanded roles in cancer genetics and genetic counseling.
- Cancer genetics content must be integrated into relevant curriculum content and taught at all levels of nursing education.
- Continuing-education and specialized educational programs must be developed and provided to practicing oncology nurses.
- Partnering with healthcare providers and specialty organizations with a focus in genetics is essential for providing comprehensive care to high-risk individuals.
- Oncology nursing practice related to cancer genetics includes three levels of practice: (a) the general oncology nurse, (b) the advanced practice oncology nurse, and (c) the advanced practice oncology nurse with specialty training in cancer genetics. Nurses providing comprehensive cancer genetic counseling must be advanced practice oncology nurses with specialized education in hereditary cancer genetics.
- Nursing practice will vary according to practice level but will include activities related to assessment, diagnosis, planning/implementation, and evaluation. Practice must be consistent with guidelines defined by an individual's state nurse practice act, the nurse's educational preparation, the role scope, and standards of oncology nursing practice.

Background

As the genetics revolution continues, genetic information will be used increasingly to understand the biology of disease, characterize malignancies, develop new therapeutic modalities, and identify individuals at increased risk of developing cancer. Oncology nurses in all settings will be expected to provide patients, families, and the public with information about genetics related to cancer prevention and early detection and also to provide resources, education, psychosocial support, and counseling or referrals related to hereditary cancers. Additionally, a small percentage of advanced practice nurses with specialized training will be involved in the clinical application of cancer genetics, including counseling and education regarding cancer predisposition genetic testing. Comprehensive cancer genetic counseling includes cancer risk assessment and education, facilitation of genetic testing, pre- and post-test counseling, provision of personally tailored cancer risk management options and recommendations, and psychosocial counseling and support services. Oncology nurses, with appropriate education and experience, are ideal for providing comprehensive care in the area of cancer genetics and for meeting the needs of the increased number of individuals requiring cancer genetic risk counseling.

*Approved by the ONS Board of Directors, 1997;
revised 8/2000.*

The Board acknowledges Deborah J. MacDonald, RN, MS, coordinator of the Cancer Genetics Special Interest Group (SIG), and Ellen Giardelli, EdD, RN, CS, editor of the Cancer Genetics SIG Newsletter, for review of this position.

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