

# Nursing's Central Role in the Care of Individuals With Cancer: 1900–1940

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**A**bove all else, patients with cancer during the early decades of the 20th century needed the care of nurses. As one physician wrote in 1913, the care of a patient with cancer under a physician's direction "often devolves upon the nurse, whether the case belongs to the curable or incurable class" (Lindsay, 1913, p. 155). In the 1940s, a nurse considered that cancer nursing "provides one of the greatest opportunities to practice nursing as an art" (Smith, 1947, p. 28). Individuals with cancer required extensive nursing care. They needed nurses to support them emotionally; cleanse and dress their wounds; nourish them; relieve their pain; and help them keep clean, warm, and dry. However, the role of nurses has long been misunderstood or downplayed, and even nurses themselves have difficulty defining their profession. As author Suzanne Gordon wrote, "The odds against nurses seem to have produced a persistent and somewhat crippling identity crisis" (Gordon, 2005, p. 14). This article will argue that nurses could be termed *overlooked soldiers* in the war against cancer.

From 1900–1940, great changes occurred in the care of patients with cancer. Safer anesthesia, more complex surgeries, and the advent of radiation therapy were responsible, in part, for moving cancer treatment from home to the hospital. The specialization of cancer nursing began to evolve against a backdrop of more standardized general nursing education (Lusk, 2005). Over the course of those years, a diagnosis of cancer lost some of its dread; people started to talk about the war on cancer with some hope of winning. However, cancer appeared to be gaining ground as other diseases receded. The American Society for the Control of Cancer (ASCC) stated in 1931 that, although cancer was the sixth most frequent cause of death in New York after tuberculosis, pneumonia, heart disease, nephritis, and cerebral hemorrhage, in 1929 it ranked second only to heart disease in terms of mortality (ASCC Publica-

**Purpose/Objectives:** To document the central role of nursing care in the continuum of cancer awareness, treatment, and palliation from 1900–1940.

**Data Sources:** Primary sources were student nurses' lecture notes, hospitals' annual reports and other literature, and published materials of the period.

**Data Synthesis:** Throughout the years reviewed, the warning signs of many types of cancer were included in nurses' education. Nurses were integral to the care and well-being of individuals diagnosed with cancer.

**Conclusions:** In the first four decades of the 20th century, nursing care of individuals with cancer became increasingly technical and specialized. This article documents the nursing care that was practiced at the time. The issue of concealment of a cancer diagnosis affected nurses' care. Nurses were seen by the American Society for the Control of Cancer as key players in the public's awareness of cancer.

**Implications for Nursing:** The care, skill, and knowledge of nurses were central to patients coping with a cancer diagnosis.

tions and Reports, 1931). Therefore, the role of nurses remained pivotal. Throughout those years, patients with cancer continued to need extensive and complex nursing care. Many patients with cancer eventually died, and the patients and their families needed nurses to assist them through the difficult end-of-life process. In addition, cancer was perceived as more a woman's disease in those years and nurses, primarily women, were essential to cancer education.

## The Work of Cancer Nursing

One nurse in the early 1920s termed cancer "this most suffering disease" (Barton, 1923, p. vi), and it surely was. Mary Watson, 65 years old in 1896, suffered from a cancerous growth on her face. Her long-time nurse,