

# Driving Forces That Transformed the Care of Individuals With Cancer From 1900–1940

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**D**ramatic forces evolving in the late 19th century contributed to the transformation of the clinical care of individuals with cancer. The building of cancer hospitals, reporting of increasing numbers of cancer cases, medical specialization, and the declared war on cancer contributed significantly to the progress of change. Physician acknowledgment of the growing impact of cancer resulted in the formation of the American Society for the Control of Cancer in 1913. The clinical work of nurses was essential yet overlooked in many historical accounts of the time. Historical research provides evidence of the development of the oncology nursing specialization in the 1900s through the 1940s. Nurses required knowledge, skills, compassion, and fortitude to provide care to individuals with advanced cancers undergoing radical and sometimes dangerous therapies in hospitals and homes. Early nursing leaders provided the vision, established the foundation, and cultivated the passion for the emergence of the specialty.

## Hospital Growth

In the late 19th century, influential advocates for the plight of individuals with cancer were calling for change. The building of a specialized cancer hospital was the vision of surgeon J. Marion Sims, MD, known as the Father of Modern Gynecology. Sims founded the New York Women's Hospital, from which he was ejected twice because he broke the rules and admitted women with cancer for surgery (Fleming, Eyre, & Pogue, 2009). In 1883, Sims stated,

A cancer hospital is one of the greatest needs of the day, and it must be built. We want a cancer hospital on its own foundation—wholly independent of all other hospitals. . . . Let me beg you to take steps at

**Purpose/Objectives:** To identify driving forces that established the groundwork for a more dedicated approach to health care for individuals with cancer in the early 20th century.

**Data Sources:** Letters, books, and journal articles published in the early 20th century, as well as materials and communications from several archival sources.

**Data Synthesis:** The increasing incidence of cancer cases and the building of cancer hospitals were among the dramatic forces in the late 19th century that contributed to the transformation of the clinical care of individuals with advanced cancer. Historical research provided evidence for the early development of the specialization of oncology nursing.

**Conclusions:** In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the stigma attached to cancer contributed to delays in diagnosis. The great majority of patients were diagnosed with advanced diseases that were incurable. Providing care to patients with cancer was a problem in hospitals and homes. Radical surgeries and the therapeutic use of radium placed unique demands on patients, their family caregivers, and nurses. Nurses adopted new roles and provided detailed bedside care routines; educated patients, families, and the public; published journal articles and textbooks; and advocated for change.

**Implications for Nursing:** Early leaders provided the vision, established the foundation, and cultivated the passion for the emergence of specialized nurses to provide individualized care to patients with cancer. Oncology nurses and nurse leaders are needed to sustain the continual transformation of the specialty so that the individualized needs of patients with cancer are met.

once to inaugurate a movement which must culminate in a great work so much needed here and now (Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, 1984, p. 5).

Two women from the board of the New York Women's Hospital led the way to fulfill Sims' vision. Elizabeth Cullum, her cousin Augusta Astor, and Augusta's husband John Jacob Astor took up the fight against those denying hospitalization to women with cancer. The battle was