

Ethical challenges are inherent in oncology clinical practice. Ranging from transitions in care to code status and treatment decisions, these ethical challenges can have an acute effect on nurses, with well-established connections to moral distress and other psycho-emotional sequelae. The availability of a nurse ethicist can provide invaluable resources to support nurses in awareness of ethical challenges and support for ethical decision making in practice.

#### AT A GLANCE

- The nurse ethicist is in a unique position to influence patient care and outcomes and support nursing practice.
- Providing routine opportunities for discussion of ethical concerns promotes a deeper understanding of the management of challenging issues.
- Ethical resources exist that can be applied to any oncology setting to enrich clinical practice.

#### KEYWORDS

ethics; oncology nursing; decision making; continuing education

#### DIGITAL OBJECT IDENTIFIER

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# The Role of Oncology Nurses as Ethicists

Training, opportunities, and implications for practice

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**E**thical dilemmas are inherent in oncology nursing practice because of the complexity of care, patient and family expectations, and the treatment direction provided by the healthcare team. Similar to nurses across specialty populations, oncology nurses may face ethical challenges when conflicts arise among colleagues, patients, and families, particularly around disagreements related to transitions in care (Cohen & Erickson, 2006). Oncology care providers have been shown to carry the burden of suffering of their patients; when a patient outcome is not perceived as ideal, the nurse may carry additional burden, such as a personal sense of futility or failure (Potter et al., 2010), particularly in high-acuity oncology populations, such as bone marrow transplantation (Neumann et al., 2018). A retrospective review of clinical ethics consultations requested by nurses in the oncology setting identified concerns about appropriate level of care as the most frequently requested consultation, of which more than 90% involved topics related to code status, transition to palliative care, or hospice (Gallagher, Neel, & Sotomayor, 2018).

The nurse ethicist has the potential to address these concerns at the point of care delivery, serving as a mentor for nurses encountering ethically challenging situations and potentially ameliorating the sequelae

that can occur for nurses, including moral distress (Morley, 2016a, 2016b). Guided by *The Code of Ethics for Nurses With Interpretive Statements* (American Nurses Association, 2015), the nurse ethicist is in a position to enhance the ethical climate of the healthcare setting—as a participant in interprofessional ethics committees and as a mentor for clinical staff facing ethical challenges. This article presents ways in which a nurse ethicist can be trained and integrated in the oncology setting, as well as resulting ethicist-led initiatives to support nursing practice.

#### Nurse Ethicist Training and Educational Opportunities

The nurse ethicist has been referenced and broadly defined in the literature as a nurse with some degree of training—academic or clinically based—who serves as a teacher and mentor for nurses and other interprofessional healthcare providers (Schroeter, 2007; Wocial, Bledsoe, Helft, & Everett, 2010). However, training, education, and opportunity are variable for nurse ethicists.

#### Academic Offerings

Ethical content is broadly, though potentially not uniformly, integrated in professional nursing programs (Iseminger, Buratto, & Storey, 2016) and may assist nurses in identifying, managing, and coping with ethically challenging