

# Empowering the Radiation Oncology Triage Nurse Role: A Single-Center Analysis

Benjamin W. Weber, MA, MB(ASCP)<sup>CM</sup>, Grace C. Blitzer, MD, Colin M. Harari, MD, Shari L. Ruesga, BSN, RN, Karol J. Huenerberg, RN, MSN, FNP-BC, APNP, AOCNP<sup>®</sup>, Bethany Anderson, MD, and Jessica M. Schuster, MD



**BACKGROUND:** Triage nurses play a crucial role in addressing patient telephone calls. However, topics that radiation oncology (RO) triage nurses encounter have not been thoroughly investigated.

**OBJECTIVES:** This project established baseline patient issues addressed via telephone by RO triage nurses in a clinically busy academic RO department; identified themes and potential areas for workflow improvement; and evaluated interprofessional perceptions of RO triage from nurses, physicians, and radiation therapists.

**METHODS:** This two-part study was conducted from September through November 2021 using a retrospective chart review that analyzed patient communications to the RO nurse triage line. Physicians, nurses, and radiation therapists completed an online survey about their experiences with nurse triage.

**FINDINGS:** Analysis revealed 13 message themes, with scheduling questions being the most common theme. Survey results indicated that average provider satisfaction with the effectiveness of triage was 3 of 5, perceived triage nurse preparedness to resolve encounters was 3 of 5, and perception of the triage program by physicians was 2.4 of 5.

## KEYWORDS

nursing triage; interprofessional practice; quality improvement

## DIGITAL OBJECT IDENTIFIER

10.1188/23.CJON.637-643

**ONCOLOGY NURSES ARE PART OF THE INTERPROFESSIONAL** care team, and they participate in diverse ways: through direct patient care, as part of the oncology research team, in clinical trial administration, and as nurse navigators. When participating in direct patient care, oncology nurses provide supportive care, assist in scheduling and care coordination, and educate patients (Cook et al., 2019; Young et al., 2020). Nurses in radiation oncology (RO) provide patient education, emotional support, management of treatment-related side effects, departmental leadership, and clinic management. In addition to these roles, nurses in RO triage patient concerns (Moskalenko et al., 2019; Voigt et al., 2021).

Nursing triage is the process used to rapidly respond to patients' concerns, ensuring that patients receive care in the appropriate setting, by the appropriate healthcare provider, and with a prompt response (Reblora et al., 2020). The implementation of nursing triage in the ambulatory oncology setting has been effective (Jernigan et al., 2020; Steingass & Maloney-Newton, 2020) and has improved access to oncology-specific resources in this setting (Martinez & Tanner, 2019). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic forced healthcare providers to maximize the use of their electronic health record (EHR) systems and to leverage them to improve efficiency in healthcare delivery and solve emerging logistical problems (Yackzan & Shah, 2021).

However, the role of the RO triage nurse has not been well studied, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, during which time EHR patient messaging increased. In addition to the lack of data on RO nursing triage, the role of the RO triage nurse may be misunderstood by fellow RO professionals (Schultz et al., 2021). Without elucidating the substance of the daily practice of nursing triage in RO, optimization of RO nurse education programs and nursing practice autonomy cannot be achieved.

The purpose of this project was to establish baseline patient issues addressed via telephone by RO triage nurses in a clinically busy academic RO department. The project aims were to identify themes and potential areas for workflow improvement and to evaluate interprofessional perceptions of RO triage from nurses, physicians, and radiation therapists.

## Methods

### Study Design, Sample, and Setting

This two-part study used a retrospective chart review followed by an online survey completed by physicians, nurses, and radiation therapists. This