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

Karen Kane McDonnell, MSN, RN, AOCNS®

Dramatic 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 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