QUESTION

How do you start an oncology nursing career during the COVID-19 pandemic?

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My passion for oncology started when I was just eight years old. My mother sat with me and shared that my dad had cancer. I saw my father cry as I heard the news, so I immediately knew something was very, very wrong. My father was diagnosed with mantle cell lymphoma and was given only six months to live. He fought for five long years and left a legacy of love, laughter, and Kenny Chesney sing-alongs. Fast-forward 15 years, and I landed my first nursing job on an oncology unit. My dream of working with patients with cancer was finally coming true, or so I thought.

Little did I know, while I was sitting in hospital orientation in March 2020, the second COVID-19 death in New Jersey happened at my hospital. To make matters worse, this patient’s family members were also in our hospital fighting for their lives. On my first day on the oncology floor, I heard my manager say, “Get all the patients off the floor. We are going COVID.” It was finally time for me to face what the whole world was fearing. All I could think was, “This is not what I signed up for.” I wanted to treat patients with cancer, give them their chemotherapy and any transfusions they may need, and then send them home to be with their families. After all, that is what my dad’s nurses did for us.

Within three hours, my floor went from seven medical-surgical patients to 18 direct admissions for only two nurses and me, a brand-new nurse resident. Who was I kidding? I was not useful. I did not know anything about nursing yet. Did my manager think I was capable of taking care of these patients?

Amid all the chaos, I had to go back to basics. I became a nurse to treat people with cancer. However, COVID-19 became the figurative “cancer” I was now treating. All my same principles I held originally were still applicable. I was still helping people through their COVID-19 treatments, giving them lifesaving medications, and hopefully sending them home to be with their families, just as I would with any of my patients with cancer.

The oncology nurses I worked with seamlessly transitioned from oncology nurses to pandemic nurses in less than a 12-hour shift. Witnessing this firsthand will forever influence my oncology nursing career. They taught me how to build upon my nursing school knowledge by intentionally being present in the moment. Everyday nursing will have its unending challenges; however, just by being present, I will build my skills no matter what challenges I face. I only had basic nursing fundamentals at the start of my career and the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, more than a year into the pandemic, my skills have exponentially grown.

This unprecedented time in health care enabled me to learn, rather quickly, in a nonjudgmental environment. My coworkers, although some had been nurses for many years, were also learning how to be a nurse in a pandemic. Everyone on the oncology unit and throughout our hospital had no choice but to rely on one another. Years of experience and specialties no longer mattered. We all had to work together as one cohesive team, just as nursing was originally created to be.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a unique, invaluable start to my nursing career. Having the opportunity to take care of patients admitted to the hospital with various diagnoses, even COVID-19, gifted me with matchless experience. Being many patients’ only source of human contact during their hospital stays instilled in me a newfound compassion. My patients were completely alone and scared. By being friendly, considerate, and compassionate, I was able to make a difference in my patients’ lives and have them forget, even just for a little, the pandemic swarming around them. Throughout this experience, my passion for oncology has only been amplified. The lessons and nursing experiences I have learned have forever transformed my nursing career.

RESOURCES

- **American Nurses Association**
  Informs and supports nurses during the COVID-19 pandemic

- **International Nursing Review**
  Discusses ethics, nursing, and the COVID-19 pandemic

- **Oncology Nursing Society**
  Provides information regarding the coronavirus

**KEYWORDS**
- oncology nursing
- new career
- COVID-19
- pandemic
- teamwork
- empathy