Supporting One Another for 40 Years

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The Oncology Nursing Society’s (ONS’s) 40th anniversary stimulated our reflections on the professional and personal benefits of caring for people with cancer. We wanted to share a story about an oncology nurse support group that has continued to meet every six weeks for 40 years. Initially, we were all 30–49 years old and are now 70–89!

In the early 1970s, Phyllis Burgess, director of nursing at Princess Margaret Hospital (PMH) in Toronto, along with the staff at PMH, became concerned about the psychosocial needs of both the patients and the staff who were having increasing difficulty working with dying patients. Burgess brought a petition from the nurses to the director of PMH for psychological help and training in dealing with patients suffering from life-threatening illnesses. This petition led to the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry working with the staff to address these needs.

As a result, patient support groups began, and nurses from PMH and other centers were taught to facilitate these groups in the Coping With Cancer course. This was offered as a pilot program and sponsored by the Toronto Unit of the Canadian Cancer Society. Group meetings for inpatients and community groups for outpatients and their families aimed to help them cope with the challenges of cancer.

Our group of nine evolved from the course. In 1975, we became group facilitators in various Toronto hospitals and in the community. The support group included Mary Vachon, research scientist and mental health consultant at Clarke Institute of Psychiatry; Joan Wright Haines, nursing director of Oncology Outpatient Clinic, Toronto Western; Ellie Wasserman, head nurse, Oncology, Mount Sinai; and several other members who have contributed to the group over the years.

In my working years, all the people in the group gave amazing support, just being with nursing colleagues and being able to speak freely and know that anything said remained within the four walls of our host’s home. Now that I am retired, I love getting together for the great food, the chat, and the camaraderie.

Key words: support; compassion fatigue; oncology nursing history

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