

Communication Training

Needs among oncology nurses across the cancer continuum

Elaine Wittenberg, PhD, Joy Goldsmith, PhD, Haley Buller, MSHSC, Sandra L. Ragan, PhD, and Betty Ferrell, PhD, RN, MA, FAAN, FPCN, CHPN



BACKGROUND: Oncology nurses are responsible for communication-aimed prognosis, patient education about cancer care and treatment, survivorship, and care coordination. Communication difficulties and uncomfortable communication topics put nurses at risk for compassion fatigue.

OBJECTIVES: Supporting nurse communication skills requires institutional policies and structures to foster patient-centered communication. This study reports on communication training needs for oncology nurses to inform future development of communication curricula and institutional training.

METHODS: A national survey of oncology nurse teams (N = 355) attending one of four communication training courses was used. Surveys were used to evaluate institutions' current patient-centered communication practices and to ascertain institutional communication training needs.

FINDINGS: Nurses' role in communicating prognosis remains unclear, and training is needed for discussing survivorship. Curriculum development should be congruent with institutionally defined roles for nurse communication.

KEYWORDS

communication education/training; nursing; oncology; patient-centered care

DIGITAL OBJECT IDENTIFIER

10.1188/19.CJON.82-91

THE CANCER TREATMENT LANDSCAPE HAS EXPANDED to include new immunotherapy agents, so oncology nurses need to be skilled communicators who can educate patients and families and advocate for the management of short- and long-term side effects (Kennedy Sheldon, 2017). Nurses are increasingly responsible for communication aimed at promoting healthy living, patient education about cancer care and treatment, and care coordination among a variety of cancer providers. Communication skills have been identified as a component of the scope and standards of practice for oncology nurses and as a standard for professional performance (Brant & Wickham, 2013). Interprofessional oncology clinical practice is essential for coordinating cancer care, and the oncology nurse generalist competencies highlight the importance of nurse communication skills in the area of teamwork, requiring "effective therapeutic communication skills during interactions with people with cancer, caregivers, and fellow members of the interprofessional care team" (Gaguski et al., 2017, p. 10). However, knowledge gaps in nursing education about oncology remain, making it essential for institutions to foster an infrastructure that supports patient-centered communication practices, as well as provide ongoing staff education and training for communication skill building. In oncology nursing, staff training and education and appropriate staffing levels are among the most pressing practice challenges (Nevidjon, 2018), and high patient workload is a strong predictor of unfavorable ratings for nurse communication (McFarland, Johnson Shen, & Holcombe, 2017).

The COMFORT Communication training program is a National Cancer Institute (NCI)-supported project (R25CA174627) that educates oncology nurses about palliative care communication to improve patient-centered communication and cancer care. The communication course provides essential communication skills and tools oncology nurses need to provide quality care across the cancer continuum. The purpose of this article is to present institutional practices and communication training needs as reported by a national sample of oncology nurses who attended one of four communication training courses. Capturing a national perspective of communication training needs for oncology nurses will inform the development of communication curricula, institutional training, and policy priorities, which are imperative to ensuring quality cancer care.