

Assessing and Implementing Nursing Standards in Pediatric Oncology Units in a Low- to Middle-Income Country

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Oncology nurses are stakeholders in the global fight against childhood cancer. In low- to middle-income countries, the burden of care on nursing staff is high, and nurses face several unique challenges. To optimize pediatric oncology care, Indus Hospital and Health Network partnered with six public-sector pediatric oncology units across Pakistan to encourage the implementation of baseline nursing standards as developed by the International Society of Paediatric Oncology Nursing Network.

AT A GLANCE

- Implementation of baseline nursing standards positively contributes to the delivery of high-quality oncology nursing care.
- Pediatric oncology nurses in low- to middle-income countries can face unique challenges that hinder professional growth.
- Empowerment and institutional support to participate in educational activities may help to achieve optimal baseline nursing standards across all domains in resource-limited settings.

KEYWORDS

oncology nursing; resource-limited; low- to middle-income; standards and training

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As efforts against infectious diseases progress across low- to middle-income countries (LMICs), noncommunicable diseases, particularly childhood cancer, have emerged as a major concern (Hinds & Linder, 2020). Nearly 90% of children with cancer reside in LMICs. However, this may be an underestimated figure because of a paucity of reliable data and population-based cancer registries (Bhakta et al., 2019). Late diagnosis and low access to effective management and therapy in resource-limited countries have resulted in five-year pediatric cancer survival rates lower than 30% (Lam et al., 2019).

Oncology nurses are stakeholders in the global fight against childhood cancer, particularly in LMICs, where nurses provide most of the clinical care (Yates et al., 2020; Young et al., 2020). Specialized oncology nursing training is largely unavailable in LMICs (Karim et al., 2021). Overwhelming workloads, inadequate financial support, limited academic opportunities, and lack of mentorship are significant hindrances to retention of oncology nurses in LMICs (Mezgebu et al., 2021).

In Pakistan, nurses are viewed as subordinates to physicians, and nursing as a profession is often pursued by people from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Mezgebu et al., 2021). The Pakistan Nursing Council upgraded the minimum licensing requirements for a nurse to a BSN degree in 2006 (Mezgebu et al., 2021). Specialization following achievement of a bachelor's degree is mandatory to earn a postbaccalaureate nursing degree. However, nurses seldom specialize in pediatric oncology or pursue master's degrees because of high costs and limited availability of academic programs in the country (Mezgebu et al., 2021).

The International Society of Paediatric Oncology (SIOP) Nursing Network developed a set of baseline nursing standards that emphasize the fundamental role of nurses in caring for children with cancer (Day et al., 2021). The Indus Hospital and Health Network (IHHN) is one of the few hospital networks in Pakistan implementing these nursing standards. The Department of Pediatric Hematology and Oncology at IHHN was awarded the My Child Matters grant by the Sanofi Espoir Foundation for holistic improvement in care for children with cancer through teaching, training,