



Securing and Maintaining an Adequate Oncology Nursing Workforce

In 2009, an estimated 1.48 million Americans will be diagnosed with cancer, and more than 562,000 will lose their battle with this disease. At the same time the national nursing shortage is expected to worsen. Cancer is a complex, multifaceted chronic disease, and people with cancer require specialty-nursing intervention at every step of the cancer experience.

Oncology nurses are on the front lines in the provision of quality care for cancer patients – administering chemotherapy, managing patient therapies and side-effects, providing treatment education and counseling to patients and family members. People with cancer are best served by nurses who specialize and are certified in oncology care.

A study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that nursing shortages in hospitals are associated with a higher risk of complications – such as urinary tract infections and pneumonia, longer hospital stays, and even patient death.¹ With an increasing number of people with cancer needing high-quality health care, coupled with an inadequate nursing workforce, our nation could quickly face a cancer care crisis of serious proportion, with limited access to quality cancer care, particularly in traditionally underserved areas.

Nurses also help conduct cancer research and clinical trials. With a shortage of cancer research nurses, progress against cancer will take longer because of scarce human resources coupled with the reality that some practice and cancer center resources could be funneled away from cancer research in order to pay for the hiring and retention of oncology nurses to provide direct patient care.

Patient Navigators Save Lives and Lower Health Care Costs

Navigating the health care system can be an insurmountable journey for many, especially when they are low-income or uninsured individuals. Helping people stay healthy and overcome barriers to health care – from screening to diagnosis, treatment, and beyond – is the idea behind “Patient Navigators” and the Patient Navigator Program run by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA).

Patient Navigator Programs:

- Rely on local resources and people who already work in community health centers, clinics, and local hospitals to identify patients who may need help;
- Make more efficient use of health programs Congress has already created;
- Providing community outreach and counseling on disease prevention and healthy lifestyle choices;
- Promoting early detection screening tests;
- Ensuring that medical instructions are understood and followed; and,
- Addressing other barriers to health care that medically underserved individuals often face

The Members of Once Voice Against Cancer urge Congress to fund a higher rate of nursing scholarships and loan repayment applications, support other essential programs to sustain our nation’s nursing workforce, and to support the Patient Navigator Program.

¹ Needleman J., Buerhaus P., Mattke S., Stewart M., Zelevinsky K. “Nurse-Staffing Levels and the Quality of Care in Hospitals.” *New England Journal of Medicine* 346:, (May 30, 2002): 1715-1722.