Why our undergraduate nursing programs need oncology content: Reflections of a nursing instructor

by Catherine Fox

ABSTRACT
Undergraduate nursing education programs can play an integral role in developing the next generation of nurses by incorporating more oncology content to meet the needs of the increasing numbers of patients diagnosed with cancer. While oncology nursing is a specialized area of practice, student nurses and new graduates will come in contact with patients who have been diagnosed with cancer whether they work on a specialized unit or not. Increasing the amount of oncology content provided in undergraduate nursing programs can help to encourage interest in this specialty area and improve the ability of new graduates to care for this patient population.

BACKGROUND
According to the Canadian Cancer Society (2018), “about 1 in 2 Canadians will develop cancer in their lifetimes and 1 in 4 will die of the disease” (p.6). With an increasing incidence of cancer and improved survival rates in those with cancer, there is a need for all nurses to be knowledgeable about cancer care (Cannon, Watson, Roth, & LaVergne, 2014; Childress & Gorder, 2012).

Unfortunately, a majority of undergraduate nursing students are not exposed to oncology content in either classroom or clinical settings (Flynn, 2015). Undergraduate programs in Canada are not designed to prepare entry-level nurses to work competently in specialized oncology areas (Canadian Association of Nurses in Oncology [CANO], 2015). Oncology nursing education in Canada is typically offered post undergraduate through unit orientation and continuing education programs (CANO, 2015). However, according to the National Nursing Education Framework (Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing [CASN], 2015), undergraduate programs are meant to prepare nurses as a generalist nurse for entry to practice. The role of the generalist nurse is one who is prepared at a basic level to care for all patients, including oncology patients (CANO, 2015). Individuals diagnosed with cancer are encountered in all areas of care and are frequently admitted to general medical or surgical areas (Cannon et al., 2014). Therefore, in order to provide competent care for these patients, new graduate nurses require a general understanding of cancer care. This emphasizes the importance of including oncology content in undergraduate nursing programs. The implementation of oncology content into undergraduate nursing programs has been shown to better prepare future nurses to care for this patient population and stimulate interest into this nursing specialty (Flynn, 2015).

REFLECTION
I began my oncology nursing career on a bone marrow transplant and hematology unit. I had just less than a year of experience from a surgical floor and I felt ready to expand my knowledge base into a specialty area. As with any transition to a different area of nursing, it was a steep learning curve. There was a lot that I needed to learn in order to be competent and provide safe care to this specialized patient population. With no previous education on cancer care, it felt like I was starting from scratch. When I reflect back on my experience now, I wonder if this transition would have been easier if I had gained foundational knowledge of cancer from my undergraduate degree.

Now, as a nursing instructor with a background in oncology nursing, I am often in classroom and clinical settings and focused on this topic with undergraduate students. Over the years of clinical teaching, I have had the opportunity to teach students in a variety of areas, including my specialty of oncology. When I have been assigned to an oncology unit, I have felt excited because I had the opportunity to work in an area in which I have a strong foundation of knowledge. However, over time, I have found that this specialty has been present on every unit on which I have taught. Whether I am teaching a fourth-year clinical group on a hematology oncology unit or a third-year clinical group on a medical unit, cancer is present in all patient populations. Having background knowledge in this patient population, I have been fortunate to be able to advocate for patients with my students. I recall a time when I was teaching on a busy medical unit where one of my students was assigned a patient who had recently undergone systemic treatment for breast cancer. Even though she had been admitted for an unrelated issue, upon looking at her lab values, the student and I determined that she was neutropenic. Understanding how susceptible she was to infection, we quickly advocated for her to be moved from the double room she was in to a single room. It is experiences like this that have made me realize the importance of incorporating more oncology education into our undergraduate programs. Increasing oncology content in undergraduate nursing curricula could improve the

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ability and competence of new graduates to care for this patient population in all areas of nursing.

CONCLUSION

Oncology nursing is a specialized area that could use further emphasis in undergraduate nursing curricula (Flynn, 2015). Regardless of the area in which they work, nurses should have a basic understanding of cancer education in order to provide the best possible care for this increasing patient population (Cannon et al., 2014). My background as a registered nurse and educator in oncology has emphasized to me that, as a profession, we can better prepare our future nurses for practice in all areas through the implementation of oncology nursing education in undergraduate programs. Nurse leaders, faculty, and educators need to join together to advocate for an increase in oncology content in undergraduate programs. The implementation of oncology content has the potential to increase competence in our future nurses, expand interest in this nursing area, and improve patient outcomes. Our future nurses need our support and knowledge in caring for this patient population.

REFERENCES