Finding our Collective Voice

Every year, in the lead-up to our annual conference, I am in awe of how CANO/ACIO members come together to get things done. It is astounding what takes place behind the scenes to prepare for and host a high-quality conference every year. Yet, there is no fuss, no drama (well, maybe a little bit of drama), and very little hesitation to step up to contribute. Each year we have a collaborative, pragmatic, articulate, wise and enthusiastic community of volunteers coming together with a common purpose—to create a forum for networking, celebrating and sharing the best of oncology nursing practice, education, research and leadership with our peers. From the Recognition of Excellence committee who ensures our peers are appropriately nominated for awards, to the scientific and planning committees, to those presenting at and/or attending the conference (and many more not mentioned), it takes a village of committed oncology nurses to make the conference a success. In every sense and every way, each of these nurses are leaders. And, it seems, we are very good at coming together for some things that are “inward facing” to our profession, such as focusing on our collective professional development and pride.

However, when it’s time to come together for more “outward facing” actions, such as having a voice in shaping health and cancer care policy and systems, we are no less leaders, yet we are less cohesive, visible and effective. Steven Lewis (2010), reflecting on our nursing profession, suggests we have so many voices, yet so little voice. Despite being “numerically dominant” within the health care system, and having day-to-day experiences and knowledge of where policies and the system itself do not serve patients and families best, we rarely exercise our knowledge and power to promote sustained change.

Individually and collectively, oncology nurses can and should play a significant role in shaping the contexts and structures within which cancer care is delivered.

Our conference theme this year, Future Ready: Together, Towards Tomorrow, challenges us to find our collective voice, so that we may contribute to shifting our cancer care system to be more person centred and optimally address patient and family needs across the care continuum. We have an outstanding conference program taking shape, with authors and presenters leading the way to improve the patient and family experience, promote interprofessional collaboration and teamwork, and enhance professional development and leadership skills to influence system change.

As an organization, CANO/ACIO strives to support its members to continue to develop and lead this very important work. However, we must also come together in new and different ways to locate, position and augment our collective voice to influence policy and system change. The CANO/ACIO board has begun to develop a new strategic plan for 2017–2019, based on membership and stakeholder input and environmental scanning.

This new strategic plan will see CANO/ACIO continue to strengthen existing and leverage new partnerships that further CANO/ACIO’s vision to be a driving force nationally and an influencing force internationally in advancing excellence in oncology nursing across the cancer control spectrum. Foundational to achieving this vision, a number of important initiatives must be put in place. For example, we will develop supports to strengthen members’ leadership skills and capacities, so that in every moment of practice, oncology nurses are leading change. We must determine how our various roles (e.g., LPN/RPN, RN, NP, CNS) and scopes of practice come together synergistically to promote equitably high-quality cancer care. We must continue to support oncology nurses to achieve and maintain specialized oncology knowledge and skills, through improving access to education and mentorship, but also through ensuring organizational leadership understands the value in supporting oncology nurses to achieve certification and other professional development goals. To ensure a future workforce that has the knowledge, skills and voice to be leaders, we also must develop and mentor the next generation of oncology nurses. Individually and collectively, we must position ourselves proactively to have a voice nationally on matters that are important to patients and families at risk for/living with cancer. And we must measure the impact that our voice, knowledge and skills have on patient and family outcomes, at the individual, collective and system level.

These are not easy tasks to set out for the next three-year strategic plan. But we know, based on CANO/ACIO’s 30-year history, that its members are not afraid of a challenge and instinctively understand the essential need to continue to reach for excellence, as a member of a professional oncology nursing organization. If we do not take up the challenge, it is the patients and families whom we serve who suffer the consequences.

The CANO/ACIO board will draft the foundations for the 2017–2019 strategic plan, consulting with and harnessing the expertise of members to formalize its structure and deliverables. Together, we will find our collective voice, as we take up the challenge to be future ready. Patients and their families deserve nothing less.

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REFERENCE