Introducing NEW Patient Symptom Management Guides
by Stephanie Burlein-Hall and Tamara Harth

As oncology nurses, helping patients understand the cause of cancer-related symptoms and how to manage them is an essential part of our role. Symptom management crosses all cancer sites, stages of disease, and the various treatment modalities. CANO’s third practice standard for the specialized oncology nurse, Management of Cancer Symptoms and Treatment Side Effects, states:

The specialized oncology nurse integrates and applies knowledge of cancer pathophysiology, disease progression, treatment modalities, treatment side-effects and complications, and symptom problems to assess, plan, implement and evaluate the outcomes of best practice/evidence-based care and other clinical interventions (Canadian Association of Nurses in Oncology, 2006).

One of the competencies associated with this standard reinforces the use of patient education principles to help patients and their family members understand how to manage symptoms and treatment-related side effects when they occur.

While the availability of clinician-focused, evidence-based tools for the assessment and intervention of symptoms currently exists through tools like CoStars (The Ottawa Hospital, 2016) and Cancer Care Ontario’s symptom management guides (CCO, 2016), to date no evidence-based patient education resources have been widely available to clinicians.

Recently, Cancer Care Ontario launched a series of symptom management guides for patients that incorporates evidence-based information that is easy to read and links seven symptoms (pain, fatigue, appetite, nausea/vomiting, dyspnea, anxiety and depression) identified on the Edmonton Symptom Assessment System (ESAS). In Ontario, all patients receiving cancer care through the regional cancer centres and associated partner sites, complete a symptom screen using the standardized ESAS tool at frequent intervals during their cancer care journey. Additional patient guides for symptoms like constipation, diarrhea and mouth care were also developed.

The How to Manage Your Symptoms — guides for patients were created by Cancer Care Ontario and a working group of clinicians and patient education leads after a gap was identified in the availability of provincially standardized comprehensive self-management information. They were developed using a rigorous methodology that included evaluating and adapting pre-existing documents to find the best of all materials, and combining them into one set of tools. (See Figure 1.)

The guides are available for download in English and French at www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms (Cancer Care Ontario, 2016). The guides are also being translated into Italian, Spanish, Tamil, Simplified and Traditional Chinese and will be available online in the coming months.

Oncology nurses are encouraged to use these guides in their practice and to share this information with nursing colleagues and other members of the inter-professional team.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS
Stephanie Burlein-Hall, RN, BScN, MEd, CON(C) APN Symptom Support and Education – Odette Cancer Centre
Tamara Harth, MLIS. Provincial Head Patient Education - Cancer Care Ontario

REFERENCES