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Fostering Psychosocial Wellness in Oncology Nurses: Addressing Burnout and Social Support in the Workplace

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Purpose/Objectives: To identify psychosocial wellness and the avoidance of burnout as key priorities for the retention of oncology nurses and to describe a program designed for a specific setting to enhance the psychosocial wellness and coping skills of oncology nurses.

Data Sources: Published research, books, and journal articles; theory; practice; and personal experience.

Data Synthesis: Oncology nurses benefit from programs designed to bolster the development of coping skills to reduce stress, foster supportive relationships in the workplace, facilitate work-related grief and bereavement, and reduce burnout.

Conclusions: Fostering psychosocial wellness in the workplace potentially can increase oncology nurse retention.

Implications for Nursing: A renewed recognition of the stressful nature of oncology nursing should give rise to programs that address the psychological well-being of oncology nurses. Oncology nursing leadership, recognizing the potential for stress and burnout inherent in this profession, should research and develop programs to enhance staff coping skills and mutual support.

Key Points . . .

- Burnout is an occupational hazard of oncology nursing, but strategies to ameliorate its occurrence have not been well researched.
- Enhancing the ability of staff nurses to support each other can result in a more supportive work environment and may improve nurse retention.
- Normalizing the experience of work-related grief and bereavement in the workplace facilitates coping in oncology nurses.
- Designing strategies to empower oncology nurses to cope with the stresses of oncology nursing should be tailored to each specific work environment.

As the pace of nursing care accelerates, staffing levels reflect the diminishing RN workforce, and the United States' nursing shortage looms on the horizon, helping oncology nurses to cope effectively with their challenging work environment emerges as an organizational imperative. Oncology nursing offers not only personal fulfillment and intellectual stimulation, but it also is intensely demanding, both physically and emotionally. Recognizing the challenges inherent in oncology nursing, particularly in the inpatient environment, and guiding nurses to meet them efficiently and effectively while caring for themselves are essential to any successful oncology program.

The diversity of career options, more lucrative compensation, and flexible work schedules have contributed to a much smaller pool of potential nursing students. The lure of nursing opportunities outside the hospital setting, in turn, has spread the available nursing workforce across a multitude of work settings. As fewer RNs are educated, the number of nurses who choose to enter oncology nursing also may decrease. In one survey, oncology nurses, oncologists, and nurse execu-

tives overwhelmingly perceived that that far too few RNs with an oncology specialty are available for practice and predicted to practice in the future (Buerhaus, Donelan, DesRoches, Lamkin, & Mallory, 2001). This situation is likely to be exacerbated as fewer students enter the profession. A sense of urgency about the retention of RNs becomes even more crucial as a cadre of seasoned nurses approaches retirement age. The need to value and treasure oncology nurses has never been greater than it is today.

Valuing Oncology Nurses

Appreciating oncology nurses as a cherished resource in the healthcare setting mandates a comprehensive approach to

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