



## Oncology Nursing Society

125 Enterprise Drive • Pittsburgh, PA 15275-1214

Toll Free: 866-257-4ONS • Phone: 412-859-6100 • Fax: 412-859-6165

help.ons.org • www.ons.org

November 29, 2023

Dr. Elizabeth M. Jaffe  
Chair, President's Cancer Panel  
National Institutes of Health  
9000 Rockville Pike  
Building 31, Room B2B37, MSC 2590  
Bethesda, MD 20892

Dear Dr. Jaffe,

Oncology nurses are privileged to support people with cancer through the entire cancer experience, from diagnosis and treatment into survivorship or as they face their end-of-life journey. As such, they play a unique role in guiding patients and their families through this experience, and we are grateful for the opportunity to offer lessons learned from this experience to the Panel.

Patient navigation is intended to remove barriers to care and treatment from detection to survivorship, including financial and logistical obstacles, with the goal of improved health outcomes and quality of life. We are pleased to see the Panel recognize the importance of these services, given the complex nature of cancer treatment. This is particularly true for patients from traditionally underserved communities who may need additional support services.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare professionals adopted technology at an accelerated rate to engage and care for patients, relying heavily on telehealth, communication technology-based services, electronic health record (EHR) "patient portals," and other digital health technologies. While this worked well for some, it exacerbated the disparities between patients who could access these services and those who could not.<sup>i</sup>

More than 14 million homes across the United States do not have internet access, with the South and rural areas being the most affected. In addition, even where available, those with lower incomes are less likely to have in-home internet.<sup>ii</sup> Beyond internet, access to devices is another significant gap, not just for those in rural areas or lower income brackets, but for older adults; less than half of older adults in the U.S. own a smartphone and in many low-income households that do have electronic devices, they are often shared among individuals, raising additional questions about access and privacy.<sup>iii</sup>

For those with adequate access, concerns with use of technology in healthcare were also raised after technology was rapidly integrated from the COVID-19 pandemic including limited non-English resource availability through patient portals. In 2017, 8 percent of Medicare beneficiaries reported limited English proficiency.<sup>iv</sup> Older adults may face additional challenges - nearly half of this population expressed concerns about privacy when using telehealth and difficulty using technology, including seeing and hearing their healthcare professional.<sup>v</sup>

We are concerned that increased reliance on technology or overemphasis of technology tools in patient navigation services may negate the very purpose of these services. Lack of access to technology devices and/or internet, limited digital literacy, and language barriers, may prohibit individuals from fully accessing navigation services, worsening health inequities.

As the Panel plans discussions on how to integrate technology into patient navigation during the upcoming December 7<sup>th</sup> meeting, we ask that you include how best to address these barriers to ensure that all patients can access the navigation services they need.

Again, thank you for your consideration. Should you need more information, please contact Jaimie Vickery, ONS Director of Government Affairs and Advocacy, at [healthpolicy@ons.org](mailto:healthpolicy@ons.org).

Thank you,



Dayna Gardner, PhD, RN, NPD-BC, OCN®, CCRN-K  
President, Oncology Nursing Society



Brenda Nevidjon, MSN, RN, FAAN  
CEO, Oncology Nursing Society

**About ONS** The Oncology Nursing Society (ONS) is a professional organization of over 35,000 registered nurses and other healthcare providers dedicated to excellence in patient care, education, research, and administration in oncology nursing. ONS members are a diverse group of professionals who represent a variety of professional roles, practice settings, and subspecialty practice areas. Oncology nurses are leaders in the healthcare arena, committed to continuous learning and leading the transformation of cancer care by advocating for high quality care for people with cancer.

---

<sup>i</sup> Shaw RJ. Access to Technology and Digital Literacy as Determinants of Health and Health Care. *Creat Nurs*. 2023 Nov 1:10784535231211682. doi: 10.1177/10784535231211682. Epub ahead of print. PMID: 37909069.

<sup>ii</sup> Channel, J., Shepard, D., & Huang, P. (2022). More than 14 million households across U.S. don't have internet. Retrieved August 17, 2023 from <https://www.lendingtree.com/home/mortgage/internet-access-study/#methodology>

<sup>iii</sup> Pew Research Center (2021b). Mobile fact sheet. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile/>

<sup>iv</sup> Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). (2017). Understanding communication and language needs of Medicare beneficiaries. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. <https://www.cms.gov/About-CMS/Agency-Information/OMH/Downloads/Issue-Briefs-Understanding-Communication-and-Language-Needs-of-Medicare-Beneficiaries.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> Weber, E., Miller, S. J., Astha, V., Janevic, T., & Benn, E. (2020). Characteristics of telehealth users in NYC for COVID-related care during the coronavirus pandemic. *Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association*, 27(12), 1949–1954. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jamia/ocaa216>