

LEADERSHIP & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Lessons From Our Leaders: Advancing Oncology Nursing Through the Power of the Group

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Passage of the National Cancer Act in 1971 paved the way not only for growth of comprehensive cancer centers in the United States but also for an evolution of the professionals who would provide expert cancer care. According to Lisa Begg, DrPH, RN, founding president of the Oncology Nursing Society (ONS), “That’s when the seeds of ONS were sown.” In the early days, a good deal of discussion focused on whether oncology nurses should create their own professional membership association or work with another association, such as the American Society of Clinical Oncology or the American Nurses Association. Noted Begg, “Clearly, nurses had been caring for patients who had been diagnosed with cancer forever, but no formal specialty nursing role existed until the founding of ONS. At the time, nursing was dominated by large, general nursing organizations. The founding of ONS marked the first time that cancer nurses came together to formally learn from one another, support each other, and explore issues and barriers that would lead to improved clinical care, education, and research” (Begg, 2000, p. 3).

Much has happened since those early days. Since its official incorporation in 1975, ONS has become a leader in cancer nursing care. It has grown to include more than 32,000 RNs, 223 chapters, and 30 special interest groups. It provides information and education to nurses around the world. In addition, ONS plays an active role in advocacy activities at the local, state, national, and international levels. Since

ONS’s inception, cancer nurses have seen their jobs transformed, technology and medical advances have exploded, the body of nursing research has grown exponentially, and cancer has become a chronic disease for many, rather than a likely death sentence for most.

Changes in health care and scientific advances mandate that professionals and their associations adapt and change to meet new demands. Critical to this mandate is the need for professionals to support each other. This column draws on the wisdom gained from interviews with three former ONS presidents—Begg, president from 1975–1979; Connie Henke Yarbro, MS, RN, FAAN, president from 1979–1983; and Judy Lundgren, MSN, RN, AOCN®, president from 2002–2004—to demonstrate the importance of the power of the group. Oncology nurses, whatever their current positions, can harness the power inherent in this lesson to support daily nursing activities and, ultimately, elevate the profession as a whole.

The Power of the Group Voice: Influencing Positive Change

In the 1990s, when Lundgren became active in the national leadership of ONS, she served as a corresponding member of the Government Relations Committee. It was her first formal foray into politics and public policy. She was amazed at the size, influence, and sophistication of the organization and came to recognize the importance of ONS as a voice for oncology nursing, patients with cancer, and quality care.

“As president, I was the physical face of all of these phenomenal nurses,” she said. When advocating on Capitol Hill to ensure nursing perspective on issues related to cancer care, she had the power of the group behind her. “Nurses are very powerful in that they’re viewed as authorities, people who know, and people who have answers,” Lundgren said. “That’s a great burden, but it is also a gift because a nurse can choose to use that power to create positive change.”

The respect for oncology nurses, and for ONS as an organization, provides the base on which the organization’s political power rests. As healthcare professionals, oncology nurses know that decisions made by policy makers in Washington, DC, have an impact on their ability to deliver the highest possible level of care. One of the most important things that oncology nurses can do to ensure quality care is to influence the decisions. Over the years, ONS has developed position statements that delineate its stance on key issues (ONS, n.d.). ONS members can use the positions to support their messages when communicating with leadership about issues in their workplaces or with their local and national representatives. They have the power of the group and the organization behind them. Oncology nurses across the country participate in programs to influence policy.

- ONStat: an ONS electronic grassroots advocacy network
- The ONS Capitol Gang: a group of ONS members who live in the greater Washington, DC, area and volunteer their time to assist ONS and its health policy associates with advocacy and public policy activities in the nation’s capitol

Leadership & Professional Development

This feature provides a platform for oncology nurses to illustrate the many ways that leadership may be realized and professional practice may transform cancer care. Possible submissions include but are not limited to overviews of projects, interviews with nurse leaders, and accounts of the application of leadership principles or theories to practice. Descriptions of activities, projects, or action plans that are ongoing or completed are

welcome. Manuscripts should clearly link the content to the impact on cancer care. Manuscripts should be six to eight double-spaced pages, exclusive of references and tables, and accompanied by a cover letter requesting consideration for this feature. For more information, contact Associate Editor Paula Klemm, DNSc, RN, OCN®, at klemmpa@udel.edu or Associate Editor Paula T. Rieger, RN, MSN, CS, AOCN®, FAAN, at prieger@pdq.net.

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