

The role and competencies of the oncology nurse navigator (ONN) are well defined and emphasize education, communication, and collaboration to support patients, families, and caregivers in overcoming barriers within healthcare systems. The authors describe the operationalization of the ONN role within a large academic health system and present a case study that illustrates the work of a team of navigators. The importance of co-navigating individuals with their community-based navigators and healthcare teams is presented, emphasizing the significance of interprofessional collaboration to support continuity of care for individuals with cancer.

AT A GLANCE

- Nurse navigation is a well-defined concept in oncology care, yet operationalization of the role may vary by health settings.
- In the academic medical setting, navigation focuses on supporting individuals who are primarily managed within the health system, as well as those referred from external providers for clinical trials, second opinions, or specialty care.
- Co-navigation with community-based nurse navigators is pivotal to ensure continuity of care for individuals with cancer.

KEYWORDS

nurse navigation; academic cancer center; navigation program; care coordination

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Academic Nurse Navigation

Unique aspects and strategies for success

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First conceptualized in the 1990s as a solution to address disparities and barriers observed in underserved communities of individuals presenting with advanced-stage cancer (Freeman & Rodriguez, 2011; Riley & Riley, 2016), the role of navigation has since been operationalized through an interprofessional approach to education and care coordination (Freeman & Rodriguez, 2011). The Oncology Nursing Society (ONS) and the Oncology Nursing Certification Corporation conducted a role delineation study (Lubejko et al., 2017) identifying the key attributes of the oncology nurse navigator (ONN). This resulted in competencies (ONS, 2017) defining this role as “a professional RN with oncology-specific clinical knowledge who offers individualized assistance to patients, families, and caregivers to help overcome healthcare system barriers. They provide education and resources to facilitate informed decision making and timely access to quality health and psychosocial care throughout all phases of the cancer continuum” (p. 4). The provision of certification through the Academy of Oncology Nurse and Patient Navigators (2020) further supports defined standards for practice.

The ONN role has been implemented in diverse settings to support care of individuals across the cancer continuum (McMullen, 2013), align care to clinical guidelines (Peckham & Mott-Coles, 2018), and improve outcomes, including timely treatment initiation (Jojola et al., 2017).

Building on previous publications of the operationalization of the ONN role within a comprehensive cancer center (Gordils-Perez et al., 2017), the authors present the role of the ONN within a large academic health system. The article focuses on the implementation of the role; its responsibilities, including co-navigation with community navigators; outcomes; and translation to practice within and beyond academic health settings.

Operationalizing the ONN Role in an Academic Health System

The University of Pennsylvania Health System (Penn Medicine) is a large academic medical center comprised of six hospitals and numerous outpatient settings located in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Penn Medicine is a matrix organization in which each respective site includes distinct providers and oncology services, which, taken together, provide care to more than 20,000 individuals with cancer annually. The site of care provision is associated with the cancer diagnosis, stage, and treatment requirements, including eligibility for clinical trials. There are multiple entry points to care and varied processes for referral, which, when coupled with individualized values, needs, and expectations for care, necessitate navigation to support optimal outcomes for patients.

In 2012, the nurse navigation department was established as part of Patient and Family Services (alongside social work, counseling, and nutrition). Consistent with ONS's (2010) joint