

The Community Oncology Unit (COU) in Nazareth, Israel, provides complete medical treatments to patients who live in the rural area of the country. During the COVID-19 pandemic, oncology nurses face additional challenges in facilitating cancer care. Pertinent adjustments are being made at the COU to maintain patients' safety and enable continuous oncology therapy by coordinating patients' COVID-19 testing and vaccination program.

#### AT A GLANCE

- The oncology nurse role at the Nazareth COU has been intensified during COVID-19 surges because of additional physical precautionary measures.
- Providing nursing care during the COVID-19 pandemic has stressed the role of mitigating risks of patients with cancer and expanded it to include being a case manager, coordinating additional referrals and healthcare professional home visits.
- The unique role of the oncology nurse at the COU has been exemplified in combating COVID-19 spread by taking care of scheduling vaccine administrations in addition to frequent telemedicine outreach surveying for side effects.

#### KEYWORDS

cancer care; community; COVID-19 pandemic; telemedicine; treatment

#### DIGITAL OBJECT IDENTIFIER

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# The Nazareth Community Oncology Unit

The oncology nurse's role to provide care in the environment of COVID-19

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About 30,000 new cancer cases are diagnosed per year in Israel (Israel Ministry of Health, 2020a). Every Israeli citizen insured by a health fund is entitled to receive medical services, as stated by the national health law (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2002). Most treatments for patients with cancer are administered in oncology institutes located within medical centers in Israel (<https://bit.ly/2SAJeRS>). Countrywide, only one Community Oncology Unit (COU) exists, which is affiliated with Clalit Health Services (<https://bit.ly/3tnITtz>) (Israel Ministry of Health, 2020b).

The COU in Nazareth was established in 2007 to fulfill the need of accessible cancer care for rural residents in Israel's Northern District (Yediot Aharonot, 2018). The local population of roughly 120,000 individuals is mostly Arab, of a low socioeconomic status, and living 70 km away from the tertiary hospital. The COU serves this population by operating 14 treatment stations with infusion recliners and two beds for a day unit. The COU is staffed with four part-time physicians, four nurses, an administrative assistant, and a social worker. All nurses obtained oncology certification and are authorized to administer IV treatment. In addition, the nurses have a rotation of being in charge of telemedicine, pain

management, palliative care, and patient navigation.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused the Israeli government to declare a state of emergency and enact lockdowns (March to April 2020, September to October 2020, and January 2021), during which only essential services were available (i.e., food, pharmacies, and hospitals), while public transportation was reduced, schools were closed, gatherings were banned, and outdoor exercise was limited to a distance of 1,000 meters. However, cancer care had to continue. Nurses needed to monitor this population through frequent follow-ups because of their vulnerability to becoming infected (Agbarya et al., 2020). To address the COVID-19 pandemic, new guidelines and regulations were introduced to the routine oncology practice at COU (Khouri et al., 2020).

#### Cancer Care Challenges During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Oncology nursing challenges are related both to the work environment and providing patient care during the COVID-19 pandemic. The steps to prevent COVID-19 spread at the COU encompass several areas. First, staff members had specific training regarding adjustments to the COVID-19 pandemic, which included screening questionnaires to identify early signs and symptoms in patients, as well as proper ways to wear personal protective