

Mapping the Scope of Breast Cancer Nursing Practice: Results from a European Survey

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Background

Nurses are the largest group of healthcare providers in Europe but there is great variation in cancer nursing practice across the continent and the scope of cancer nursing practice is not well understood in some European countries. Cancer nursing is not recognized as a specialty in the majority of European countries whilst in many, there is little acknowledgement of the important contribution that nurses make to cancer outcomes. Other than a postal survey carried out by EONS in 2001, little effort has been made to systematically map the current and emerging role of cancer nurses across Europe. However, given that cancer is a rapidly changing speciality, it is likely that the nature of cancer nursing has changed since this survey was carried out in 2001 and EONS therefore decided, with support from Novartis Oncology (Region Europe) to undertake a new survey with the aim of:

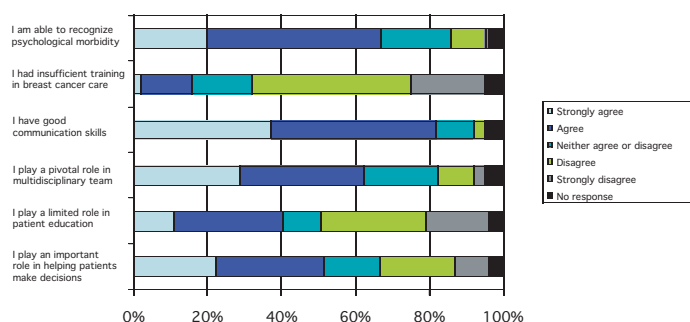
- Improving EONS's understanding of the current and emerging role of European cancer nurses in breast cancer care
- Providing information that will enable EONS to plan breast cancer nursing initiatives in a more strategic manner
- It was decided to focus initially on breast cancer nursing practice because breast cancer is the commonest cancer among women in Europe and breast cancer nursing is one of the most developed cancer nursing specialties although it is only recognised as a speciality in the UK, Ireland, Israel and the Netherlands.

The Survey

Nurses involved in the care of patients with breast cancer were invited to complete a questionnaire which was distributed at the European Breast Cancer Conference and the EONS Spring Convention, and was posted on the EONS website. The survey asked respondents to indicate the degree to which they agreed with a number of statements relating to breast cancer nursing practice. It is important to note that this survey was not confined to specialist breast cancer nurses (i.e. clinical nurse specialists or advanced practice nurses). 302 nurses from 19 countries completed the questionnaire. The majority were very experienced nurses and worked in medical or surgical oncology settings. Nearly one third had a specialist breast cancer nursing qualification and 30% indicated that they worked as a clinical nurse specialist. Not surprisingly there were significant differences in the responses of nurses from different countries and some within the same country. For example, half of the Danish respondents said that breast cancer nursing was recognised as a speciality in Denmark whilst the others correctly pointed out that it wasn't!

Figure 1

Breast cancer nurses perceptions about their roles and skills

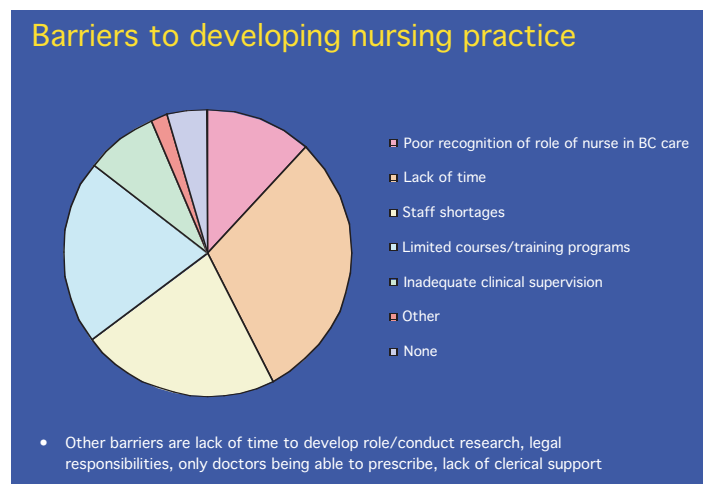


The commonest breast cancer nursing roles included the provision of psychosocial support and patient education as well as the management of side-effects. Nurses also indicated that they were involved in pre- and post-operative care as well as the administration of cytotoxic drugs. In many countries nurses stated that one of their roles included helping patients make a choice about breast cancer treatment, but it was clear from the responses that most of them believe that they are well trained, possess good communication skills and play a key role within the multidisciplinary team. However; even though most nurses indicated that they have an important role to play in patient education and helping patients make decisions, a small but significant number of nurses did not agree with this statement (figure 1). Those involved in patient education said that they use a wide variety of educational resources when teaching patients about their condition and treatment, although most relied upon printed materials that have been developed internally or provided by a pharmaceutical company.

Respondents said that lack of time is the biggest barrier they face in developing their practice (figure 2). This finding mirrors that of a survey carried out in 2004 by the UK's Royal College of Nursing on breast cancer nursing in the UK (further details of which can be obtained from their website at

<http://www.rcn.org.uk/news/display.php?ID=1335&area=Press>) whilst other important barriers were staff shortages and the limited availability of specialist breast care courses. Notwithstanding this, nearly all of the respondents indicated that they would like to learn more about different aspects of breast cancer care, particularly in relation to supportive care and meeting patients' educational and psychosocial needs.

Figure 2



The questionnaire included a number of questions to test nurses' knowledge on different aspects of breast care. Respondents were given the choice of answering true, false or don't know in response to 10 statements. Most of these were answered correctly by the majority of nurses, but over 25% of respondents indicated that they did not know the answer, answered incorrectly, or did not answer the question for 9 of the 10 statements. Respondents had particular difficulty answering questions about surgical and radiotherapeutic aspects of breast care management, and 50% were unable to give the correct answer to the statement, 'Elderly patients gain less benefit from adjuvant treatment than their younger counterparts'.

Discussion

This survey has enabled EONS to build a more accurate picture of

breast cancer nursing practice in Europe. It is clear that there are significant differences in nursing practice across the continent, but there are also commonalities. In most countries, nurses are involved in patient education and rehabilitation as well as the provision of psychosocial support. The majority of nurses are also playing a pivotal role within their multidisciplinary teams, and most believe that they have had sufficient training and are skilled to carry out their roles effectively. They are also interested in keeping up-to-date and learning more about different aspects of breast cancer care which is important as the survey demonstrates that significant knowledge deficits exist in some areas which can only be addressed through continuing professional education.

The European Oncology Nursing Society is dedicated to developing, enhancing and promoting cancer nursing in Europe through educational, research, and practice based initiatives, and on the basis of the findings from this survey, will be planning initiatives to support the development of breast cancer nursing in Europe in the near future.

Acknowledgements

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