Philadelphia presented itself in the finest of Spring weather for the 33rd annual ONS congress. The central location at the Philadelphia Convention Center was only a short walk from all the historic sites in the City of Brotherly Love and brought many of the participants closer to the roots of American democracy.

One day of pre-congress sessions were offered with obligatory pre-registration. Over the four official congress days, participants were able to choose sessions that were of interest, of importance for work, and of importance for the future of oncology nursing. Many sessions were offered twice to allow for better attendance. Depending on the session, one could also choose to attend a session depending on their level of knowledge of the subject: basic or advanced.

With approximately 6000 participants, one would imagine a rumba-samba event. The planning and the execution of the convention were excellent and the convention center accommodated all without the feeling of being crushed in the crowd. Participants could contact other members, have spontaneous discussions with session neighbors and network for future collaboration. The distance between rooms was easy to manage.

The congress program objectives were stated as:
- Describe innovations in cancer care;
- Identify ways to integrate and disseminate information about evidence-based cancer care;
- Summarize issues and trends in cancer care that will transform your commitment to the field of oncology;
- Participate in an environment of peer networking and collaboration;
- Summarize new information related to major cancer diagnoses.

These objectives were, in my opinion, met to a greater extent.

Congress newcomers, and this was almost half the participants, had an excellent opportunity to get oriented to such a large congress. Special sessions on the first day welcomed and supported these participants to help them cope with the large dimension of the congress. Despite the enormity, the atmosphere was relaxed, open, friendly, and stimulating.

A large number of industry-supported satellite symposia were offered with a large array of topics dealing with new therapies, supportive treatment options, and symptom management options. Participants had to register in advance for many of these symposia. The exhibition hall hosted approximately 200 companies, organizations, societies, hospitals, and patient interest groups.

Official Congress Opening Ceremony
The local Philadelphia chapter greeted the attendees at the opening ceremony with red, silver and blue garlands of stars. A musical entry of the Executive Board and international visitors was led by a group of Philadelphia Mummers a very well-known, traditional group of string-band musicians. The mood was festive, to say the least.

The keynote address at the opening ceremony entitled Plan, Brief, Execute, Debrief = Win presented by P. Houlahan, activated the audience for the kick-off or better said take off of the congress. Mr. Houlahan is a U.S. marine corps FA/18 Hornet instructor and pilot. The execution of a flight mission was paralleled with teamwork in the oncology nursing setting. The audience was visibly and audibly revved up by Mr. Houlahan and his colleague, a female fighter pilot, to take a different approach to solving problems and achieving goals using what he demonstrated as a “flawless execution model”.

Visiting the Sessions
The convention was divided into eight topic tracks, these being:
- Types of Cancer and Treatment
- Leadership
- Survivorship
- Practical Aspects for Clinical Practice
- Safe Practice
- Administration
- Research in Practice
- Nursing Care/Self-Growth

The current health policy problems of the U.S. were addressed in several sessions. Comparing these to the European setting, one saw and heard many similarities in health care disparities, staffing problems, and political complacency. In spite of these well-known negatives, there were more positives to derive from the lectures.

The session, How does your garden grow? presented various career options that might be open for the oncology nurse. Three main tracks were utilized; administrative roles, educator roles, clinical roles each being broken down into individual possibilities within each track. The job market offers a lot more than meets the eye, e.g. nurse lawyers, informatics, independent practice to mention a few. The presenters...
gave some useful hints as to the educational preparation for some of the less known areas. All participants received a packet of forget-me-not seeds which were labelled "encouraging growth".

Early Toxicities/ Delayed education: Providing Safety and Quality in the Management of Oral Therapies was a session devoted to the problems with the increasing number of oral cancer drugs in the U.S. and in Europe. Deficits in nurses’ knowledge of pharmacology and poor communication patterns both with patients and physicians appear to be ubiquitous. Using keypads it was shown that the work settings of 63% of the attendees do not have specific tools to teach patients about oral agents. Roberta Strohl presented some strategies to rectify the problems.

On similar lines, several lectures focused on molecular targets, whether in applied research (bench) to clinical application (bedside). The profiling of molecular characteristics has allowed single genes, growth factor receptors, and other molecular targets to be recognised not only for treatment purposes but for prevention and for early detection as well. With the targeted therapies, new side effects have taken on an important part in daily nursing activities. As in the EONS educational program, TARGET, one lecture also dealt with dermatological toxicities and the nurse’s role in providing care during treatment.

Carol Estwing Ferrans, PhD, RN, FAAN, Professor and Associate Dean for Research from the University of Illinois at Chicago, presented the Distinguished Research Special Session lecture, Research - Exposing the Deadly Difference. Ms. Ferrans demonstrated with her research findings that through nursing research change can be made in healthcare policies, legislation and increased funding to alleviate some health care disparities. Dr. Ferrans studied the prevalence of racial disparities in women with breast cancer and the higher mortality incidence due to these disparities. The results were incredible and dramatic and left one wondering how these disparities could even arise. It truly left one with an “Oh, no – not possible” feeling when looking at the facts and figures. One outcome of the study was positive: An inaugural meeting of the Consortium of Metropolitan Chicago Institutions dedicated themselves to work together to improve quality of care. We might have a look at disparities in health care on the European level – the sooner the better.

Saturday morning started with the traditional Mara Morgensen Flaherty Memorial Lectureship. Terry A. Badger, PhD, RN, FAAN presented an excellent lecture entitled Depression Assessment and Psychosocial Interventions for Cancer Survivors and Partners. The lecture started with the re-definition of the social network: change in the traditional household and who is important. Her take-home message was: If you are important to the person you are a partner whether or not related by blood or marriage.

Briefly, the content of her lecture dealt with the facts that depression is an important issue in cancer survivorship and it significantly influences cancer recovery, quality of life and possibly, long-term survival. Further, partners of cancer survivors often suffer the same or higher levels of emotional distress as the patient. She described several barriers which hinder the assessment process. Finally, she stated that all nurses can provide assessment, patient education and information, referrals and therapeutic social support.

Also on Saturday, another excellent lecture about adherence to oral tumor therapies was presented. Of particular interest was the presentation from Karin Schulte, (Dana Farber Cancer Institute). She showed the results of her study on the assessment of current nursing practice associated with oral chemotherapy adherence. Keeping the message short, one could ask: If we were involved earlier, would the adherence be better? This is a problem that seems to be universal.

One of the last sessions on Sunday morning, was "Clinical Hot Topics". This presentation featured several of cancer treatment modalities, the place of pharmacovigilance and pharmacogenomics in cancer treatment, special nursing considerations for emerging side effects of these drugs, and how cancer genetics may influence treatment decisions in the future.

Other Highlights

Meeting with the executive board of ONS as well as various ONS project leaders was a highlight of the conference for me. Topics relating to possible EONS/ONS collaboration were discussed and mapped out. Further talks with Paula Rieger Trahan (ONS CEO), Len Mafria (International Affairs), Brenda Nevidjon (President) and Georgia Decker (Past president) will explore the possibilities of the collaboration of EONS with ONS. We agreed that we could imagine joining forces on developing guidelines and leadership programs adapting the content accordingly to European circumstances.

There was time in the evening to see a bit of Philadelphia, visit the parks, enjoy a baseball game with the “Phillies” (they won) and get the feel of life outside of oncology nursing.

To say the least, after five days of conference one left with a wealth of information and with a feeling of confirmation that one is doing the right thing. I also had the feeling that we have a great task ahead of us in light of the changing health care systems around Europe and the world and it will be a challenge to provide competent, safe, and equal cancer nursing care for all. I came away realizing that European nursing does not differ greatly from that in the U.S. but because of the structure of Europe we definitely have greater gaps in the standardization of cancer care.