

Oncology Certification for Nurses

The Oncology Nursing Certification Corporation (ONCC) was founded by the Oncology Nursing Society (ONS) in 1984 in response to a request from the membership for a certification program to further establish oncology nursing as a specialty and to recognize expertise in the field. ONS leaders also recognized that public protection is a goal of professional certification (Nielsen et al., 1996). ONCC continues to uphold these goals by defining minimum competency standards and developing a mechanism to distinguish those nurses who meet the standards. All ONCC certification programs are accredited by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies and the American Board of Nursing Specialties (ABNS). These independent accrediting bodies have established nationally acknowledged standards and criteria for the recognition of certification programs and use rigorous processes to determine whether programs meet these standards (ABNS, 2002; National Organization for Competency Assurance, 2002). By meeting the standards for accreditation, ONCC maintains fair, valid, and reliable certification programs. In addition, all ONCC certifications are based on empirical research (i.e., role delineation studies) that is conducted on a regular basis and links the content of the certification examination (test blueprint) directly to practice (McMillan, Heusinkveld, Chai, Murphy, & Huang, 2002; Montgomery, 2003a, 2003b).

“Cancer is a complex, multifaceted chronic disease that requires specialty nursing interventions at every step of the disease continuum” (Coleman, 2002, p. 29). Rapid scientific and technological advances in cancer care require nurses to know more and do more than ever before. In addition, the United States is facing a nursing shortage that is expected to worsen before it improves (American Association of Critical-Care Nurses, 2002). This, coupled with the aging population and prevalence of cancer, means that fewer nurses are caring for more patients with cancer. The competence of these nurses is of paramount importance. OCN[®], AOCN[®], and CPON[®] certification provides validation of the specialized knowledge and experience required for competent performance.

It Is the Position of ONS That

- Oncology nursing certification provided by ONCC is sound and beneficial to patients and society at large. ONS encourages oncology nurses to become certified.
- ONCC certification programs are rigorous and meet nationally recognized standards. ONCC certifications are sound and legally defensible measures of oncology nursing knowledge.
- Regardless of the healthcare setting, OCN[®], CPON[®], and AOCN[®] certification benefits patients and their families, nurses, and employers. Oncology nursing certification validates that nurses have met stringent requirements for knowledge and experience and are qualified to provide competent oncology care. All nurses who provide care to patients with cancer should seek to become certified by ONCC.
- Employers who support OCN[®], CPON[®], and AOCN[®] certification demonstrate their commitment to providing the highest quality of care to patients with cancer throughout the health/illness continuum. Employers should hire OCN[®], CPON[®], and AOCN[®] certified nurses, support employed nurses in attaining and maintaining certification, reward those nurses who become certified, and inform patients and the public about the certification status of their nursing staff.
- Healthcare consumers have a right to know the qualifications of those responsible for their care. OCN[®], CPON[®], and AOCN[®] certified nurses should inform patients of their certification and explain the meaning of the certification. Certified nurses should display their credentials on their name badges and employers should support such

display (ONS, 2002).

Background

ABNS (2003) defined nursing certification as the formal recognition of the specialized knowledge, skills, and experience demonstrated by the achievement of standards identified by a nursing specialty to promote optimal patient care. Oncology nursing certification provides tangible evidence that nurses have the knowledge required to effectively provide care to patients experiencing the complex problems associated with a diagnosis of cancer throughout the disease continuum. Three oncology nursing credentials are offered by ONCC, an independent organization that is affiliated closely with ONS and the Association of Pediatric Oncology Nurses. The OCN® credential indicates that a nurse has attained basic oncology certification, focusing on adult care. The CPON® credential indicates that a nurse has attained basic oncology certification, focusing on pediatric care. The AOCN® credential indicates that a nurse has attained oncology certification at the advanced level, focusing on adult care. As of January 1, 2004, more than 20,300 nurses hold oncology nursing credentials awarded by ONCC.

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