Guest Editorial

Innovations in cancer nursing education across Europe

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With 2.7 million people in the European Union diagnosed with cancer, 1.3 million people dying from cancer in 2020 and, without intervention, the mortality rates attributed to cancer projected to increase by 24% by 2035, there have been powerful mandates at European level to tackle the burden of cancer across Europe and at national level (European Commission, 2021a, 2021b). Nurses play an important role caring for people affected by cancer as members of multi-disciplinary teams and playing a pivotal role in delivering, leading, developing cancer care and services at clinical and strategic levels (Mitema et al., 2019; European Oncology Nursing Society 2022). However, nursing and cancer care face challenges arising from workforce shortages, under-investment in services, variable education opportunities and under representation in decision-making. In response, Drury et al. (2023) set out an agenda for innovation and disruption across education, policy, research, profession and practice to ensure the sustainability of cancer care services and care for people living with, and after cancer. These authors argue for partnership, exchange of learning and co-design for the continued advancement of cancer nursing, with a critical focus on identifying and addressing inequities in role recognition and access to specialist cancer nursing education throughout Europe.

In May 2021, under the umbrella of the European Oncology Nursing Society (EONS) and with support from the European School of Oncology (ESO), a task group was set up to develop a European College for Cancer Nursing (ECCN). The purpose of the ECCN is to promote cancer nursing as a career through advancing and supporting cancer nursing education and the professional development of the cancer nursing workforce across Europe. This will enable the nursing workforce to contribute horizontally throughout the cancer trajectory, and vertically from bedside to leadership as influencers and strategic advisors (Fuller and Hansen, 2019) to reduce the cancer burden and improve care for people affected by cancer.

The ECCN offers a collegiate environment promoting and providing cancer education, professional development and networking opportunities for nurses caring for people of all ages affected by cancer across Europe and seeking to enhance care and services. The ECCN is managed by the Education Working Group of the EONS in collaboration with all EONS Working Groups (Research, Communications, Advocacy, and the Young Cancer Nurses’ Network) to integrate their educational activities into the ECCN and influence the development of cancer nursing education.

ECCN reflects the EONS vision that cancer nursing should be a recognised speciality across Europe based on a mutually agreed set of education and training outcomes that derive from a comprehensive educational curriculum. The EONS Cancer Nursing Education Framework (2022), an update of the 2018 launch, is the anchor for the ECCN. The Framework consists of eight modules (Table 1) with content addressing the key concepts for cancer nursing which enables the learner to achieve the identified knowledge learning outcomes and practice competencies. The EONS Cancer Nursing Education Framework has been viewed/downloaded from EONS website with feedback on its use including to advocate for more hours of education and training on cancer related topics, to promote development of new national cancer nursing programmes and career possibilities, to support continuing education programmes and as guidance for educational events. The Framework has steered the task group in the development of the ECCN, including structuring an education pathway across three levels of practice (Table 1).

The ECCN education pathway has three incremental levels: early career, enhanced and advanced. Nurses are recommended to start from the ‘Early career registration’ level to ensure a minimum standard for cancer knowledge and competency for the nursing workforce providing care to people affected by cancer in general and/or specialist services and, from which to build their knowledge and competencies in cancer nursing as their experience develops along their career pathway.

Following a grant from the European School of Oncology (ESO), the ECCN ‘Early career registration level’ pilot was launched in January 2023 with the first 20 nurses from across Europe participating. This pilot will run from January–September 2023, during which participants undertake five learning blocks. These have been aligned to specific modules from the EONS Cancer Nursing Education Framework (Table 1).
Table 1
ECCN Education pathway.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ECCN learning</th>
<th>Target audience</th>
<th>Aims:</th>
<th>Modules from EONS Cancer Nursing Education Framework</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early career/Registration level</td>
<td>Registered Nurses who are new or inexperienced in caring for people affected by cancer and are seeking to develop their fundamental knowledge about cancer and its treatment, and principles of cancer care</td>
<td>To provide fundamental knowledge about cancer, the process of carcinogenesis and cancer treatment, and how this knowledge informs the delivery of person-centred holistic care for people affected by cancer</td>
<td>1 Cancer Prevention, Screening, Early Detection and Health Promotion in Cancer Care</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enhanced level</td>
<td>Registered Nurses who have some experience of caring for people affected by cancer and are seeking to build on their fundamental knowledge of cancer, its treatment to develop their knowledge and skills to support people across the spectrum of cancer care</td>
<td>To enhance knowledge and skills in the delivery of person-centred, holistic care to people affected by cancer across the spectrum of cancer care</td>
<td>2 Cancer pathophysiology and the principles of treatment decision-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced level</td>
<td>Registered Nurses who are experienced in caring for people affected by cancer and are leading cancer services and innovations in care</td>
<td>To enhance knowledge and skills for leading and managing cancer care services and developing evidence for innovations in cancer care.</td>
<td>3 Cancer treatment, patient and occupational safety</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

with continuous assessment and evaluation. In addition to access to e-learning modules, learners undertake reflection as part of their learning and practice. The approach to learning, teaching and assessment is flexible and equivalent to 85 hours of study (4.5 ECTS). Mentorship is offered as part of the ECCN with dedicated and experienced cancer nurses from across Europe supporting participants. Learning, teaching, and assessment is managed on the Moodle virtual environment with monthly scheduled support from a task group facilitator and regular Mentorship meetings to promote networking across Europe. An extensive evaluation of the ‘Early career registration level’ pilot is planned to understand the experiences of participants and the impact on their cancer nursing practice. This evaluation will also inform the EONS Board decision to support development of the proposed enhanced and advanced levels of the pathway. Further information about ECCNs is available at: www. European College of Cancer Nursing (ECCN) - EONS - The European Oncology Nursing Society (cancernurse.eu)

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