

QUESTION

How can gaps in oncology sexual health care be addressed with the independent practice of nurses?

Traci A. Owen, BSN, RN, AASECT Certified Sexuality Counselor, is the executive director and a clinician at Intimate Pathways Center for Sexual Health in Broken Arrow, OK. The author takes full responsibility for this content and did not receive honoraria or disclose any relevant financial relationships. Owen can be reached at traci@intimatepathways.org, with copy to CJONEditor@ons.org.

In 1989, aged 22 years, my journey as an RN began in an adult and pediatric level I trauma center. This experience laid the foundation for my commitment to excellence in health care. Over the years, I have embraced various roles ascending the ladder of healthcare leadership, shouldering immense responsibilities and persistently seeking opportunities for professional development. This drive for continuous improvement has been a defining trait of my career.

In 2009, I ventured into oncology as a care manager. I served as a lifeline for patients with cancer and their partners. Amidst medical complexities, it became evident that patients faced other profound challenges related to their intimate and sexual relationships. Despite the growing research shedding light on these concerns, few oncology facilities have leaned into this important issue.

Recognizing this critical gap, I passionately advocated for the establishment of a sexual wellness program within my facility. In 2015, I spearheaded the development of a program tailored to meet the most common intimacy and sexual health needs of patients with cancer and their partners. The American Society of Clinical Oncology's publication of oncology sexual wellness guidelines (Carter et al., 2018) presented validation and opportunity for further enhancement of the services we offered.

To make a meaningful impact, I needed to expand my knowledge and expertise in this area. In 2018, I completed a rigorous 12-month postgraduate certificate program in sexuality counseling and education. This enriching experience not only deepened my understanding of human sexuality, but also reinforced my com-

mitment to achieving certification as an American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Therapists Certified Sexuality Counselor. This certification empowered me to begin providing my nursing services as an independent practitioner, giving me the unique opportunity to provide the highest-quality nursing care at the escalated standards I have set for myself.

In 2021, my husband and I founded a nonprofit organization, Intimate Pathways Center for Sexual Health, focused on supporting women and their partners facing cancer or other health challenges that negatively affect their intimate relationship, sexual body health, and shared sexual experience. We found ourselves in uncharted territory, but our determination, ingenuity, and compassion motivated us to forge ahead. Our ultimate vision is to cultivate a community of passionate and skilled oncology sexual health specialists across the nation.

Throughout my career, I have encountered fear and uncertainty, but I have not let them deter me from my calling. From that young and purposeful 22-year-old nurse to the seasoned healer and mentor I am today, courage has been my constant companion. My unwavering passion for this work stems from my profound belief that a cancer diagnosis reverberates throughout every facet of a patient's life.

Survivors grapple with emotional turmoil, financial strain, shifting family dynamics, and profound impacts on their intimate and sexual relationships. Addressing these concerns with sensitivity and expertise is not just a necessity, but a moral imperative.

RESOURCES

- **American Society of Clinical Oncology**
Provides interventions to address sexual problems in people with cancer
<https://bit.ly/47l0Xst>
- **Oncology Nursing Society**
Discusses how oncology nurses can become entrepreneurs
<https://bit.ly/3NRZymb>
- **ONS Voice**
Offers evidence-based approaches for sexual challenges in patients with cancer
<https://bit.ly/3RLxmCA>

REFERENCES

- Carter, J., Lacchetti, C., Andersen, B.L., Barton, D.L., Bolte, S., Damast, S., . . . Rowland, J.H. (2018). Interventions to address sexual problems in people with cancer: American Society of Clinical Oncology clinical practice guideline adaptation of Cancer Care Ontario guideline. *Journal of Clinical Oncology*, *36*(5), 492–511.

KEYWORDS

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