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Oncology nursing – Approaching a new millennium

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Professional nursing emerged in the latter part of the 19th century, a period of major scientific advancement and controversy as well as social reforms, including the changes in the role of women, educational opportunities and increasing prosperity. Whilst medicine and its use of scientific knowledge was seen as a male preserve, the emerging imagery of this period was the female nurse, acting as guardian angel and doctor's handmaiden. The impact of those images on the subsequent generations of nurses, doctors and public remained significant until today, even though early nursing theories were based in biological sciences. The public image of the nurturing, caring role of nursing still prevails and this might even be stronger within the field of oncology nursing, where the role of "being with" the patient seems to be a demand.

"Being with" and "doing to" cancer patients undoubtedly requires specific education. Florence Nightingale believed that scientific knowledge was needed and that there should be training in the art of nursing. Today nurses are expected to care with their hearts and minds, identifying patients' actual and potential health problems and to develop research strategies to prevent, ameliorate and comfort. However, how can this be achieved as long as the level of education in nursing differs considerably between countries, schools and even educators? Whilst in most countries, nurses are not yet offered to study nursing at the academic level, the number of nurses with master's and doctoral degrees, although still small compared to those in other professions (such as medicine or hospital economy), has increased. On the other side, the growing preoccupation with economic constraints has led to downsizing of the nursing profession by replacement with technicians and care assistants. Most sophisticated health care systems have not yet acknowledged the need to accept care charges within health costs.

In practice, oncology nurses can be seen as "skilled companions", an expression which attempts to bring together the science and moral basis of nursing practice. Even though it is not generally accepted anymore by the new generation of nurses, caring for patients can not be seen independent from serving and helping. The essence of oncology nursing is the caring role, which has a high price because it involves the experience of hope, fear, losses and gains. Psychological care as well as physical care are required to become evidence based nursing elements. Research therefore has to overcome the hierarchical split between "knowledge generators" and "knowledge appliers" in order to close the gap between theory and practice. Whilst academically trained nurse researchers are asked to meet the needs of nursing practice, practitioners need to increasingly enter into collaboration with trained researchers in order to advance scientifically based nursing practice, which can be shared with other professions to the benefit of cancer patients. Results of a survey among European nurse opinion leaders, related to future needs in education, research and practice of oncology nursing, will be presented.