



Cancer Nurses Society of Australia

Position Statement on the Minimum Education Requirements for Nurses involved in the Administration of Anti-Cancer Drugs within the Oncology and Non-Oncology Setting

Preamble

Anti-cancer drugs are therapeutic agents intended primarily for the treatment of cancer. The use of these agents as a component of cancer treatment has increased rapidly over the past few decades largely due to scientific developments in the area of cancer biology¹. The term anti-cancer drugs for the purpose of this position statement include traditional anti-neoplastic agents (chemotherapy), monoclonal antibodies and targeted therapies.

Anti-cancer drugs are administered utilising a range of administration routes and formulations, typically delivered over extended periods, which vary in length and cycles.

Specialised knowledge, skills and competency standards are required by health professionals to ensure safe and competent administration of these agents, in addition, the after care of people receiving these agents should be considered. Nurses must be appropriately trained to do this, and organisations must ensure these nurses work in appropriately resourced settings^{2,3,7}.

Historically, people receiving anti-cancer drugs were managed in specialised tertiary treatment facilities in major metropolitan cities. Improvements in side effect management combined with demands for cost containment, advances in technology and a greater emphasis on consumer preferences have contributed to increased numbers of smaller centres providing chemotherapy services in metropolitan, rural and remote communities.

The Cancer Nurses Society of Australia acknowledges that there are nurses practising outside of the oncology/haematology setting who are administering both anti-cancer drugs and non-cancer targeted therapy agents in the treatment of diseases other than cancer.

This position statement, in conjunction with state-wide and local level policy, aims to address the minimal education requirements for any nurse administering anti-cancer drugs in any health care setting to ensure the safe delivery of care to cancer patients receiving anti-cancer drugs.

CNSA Philosophy

The Cancer Nurses Society of Australia believes that nurses should abide by legislation, guidelines and professional standards relevant to their scope of practice as stated in the National Framework for Cancer Nursing Education³, Code of Professional Conduct for Nurses in Australia⁴, and the Code of Ethics for Nurses in Australia⁵, this requires that:

- The nurse is personally and professionally accountable for the provision of safe and competent nursing care. Therefore, it is the responsibility of each nurse to maintain the competence necessary for current practice.
- Maintenance of competence includes participation in ongoing professional education to maintain and upgrade knowledge and skills relevant to practice in a clinical, management, education or research setting.
- A nurse must take full accountability for their actions, understanding activities that are not within their scope of practice may compromise the safety of an individual. The scope of practice is based on each nurse's education, knowledge, competency, extent of experience and lawful authority.
- Nurses have a responsibility to be familiar with relevant laws to ensure that they do not engage in practices prohibited by such laws or delegate to others those activities prohibited by those laws.

In addition, the Cancer Nurses Society of Australia believes that:

- Specific education and training is necessary for health care personnel involved in the preparation, transport, administration and disposal of anti-cancer drugs, in order to minimise the risk of exposure to staff, visitors and the environment and to ensure safe and quality health services for people receiving anti-cancer drugs.
- Only registered nurses with specialised education and training in the safe handling of anti-cancer drugs and related waste can administer these medications.
- Employers must ensure nurses involved in administering anti-cancer drugs have access to education, training and environmental factors such as ease of access, light and space and other resources are addressed as a matter of necessity to ensure minimum professional and safety standards are met.
- Employers must ensure that risk assessments have been conducted and recommended processes are in place to allow nurses to maintain their competency and scope of practice in this field.

Rationale

Anti-cancer drug regimens are highly toxic to cells, and can result in a range of acute and chronic adverse effects for both the persons receiving and for those administering these treatments^{1, 9, 10, 11}. A number of these adverse effects are potentially life-threatening. The safe and effective delivery of these drugs therefore requires highly complex clinical assessment, technical and problem solving skills.

Specifically, the use of oral anti-cancer drugs requires the patient to self-administer treatment at home where drug, dose or scheduling errors are unlikely to be detected². Cancer nurses have an important role in the education of patients receiving oral anti-cancer drugs through providing specific instructions and support to these patients. It is vital to prevent medication errors and to monitor toxicities in this patient population. Patient education materials should be appropriate for the patient's reading level/literacy, patient caregiver understanding⁷.

There is considerable evidence that people who receive anti-cancer treatment experience considerable psychological distress, and have high levels of need for specialised information and support⁶. As anti-cancer treatments are often delivered over extended periods of time and require ongoing monitoring, the follow up coordination of care for the person receiving them also requires advanced nursing skills.

People receiving anti-cancer drugs require specific education in relation to both the acute and long-term side effects associated with their treatment. Cancer nurses delivering these treatments are responsible within their delivery of care to provide this level of education and information as well as delivering the treatments in the prescribed manner, safely and effectively.

Minimum Requirements

The increasing level of complexity in the administration of anti-cancer drugs requires appropriate levels of expertise and knowledge for safe and effective delivery of these agents. Staff administering these agents must have access to the most up-to-date resources within their work setting, including electronic sources.

The National Professional Development Framework for Cancer Nursing³ (EdCaN) and Cancer Australia⁸ outlines the competency standards for the specialist cancer nurse within a professional development framework to guide the development of a sustainable nursing workforce capable of providing high-quality services that meet the needs of all people affected by cancer. Supporting EdCaN resources designed to assist in the professional development of all cancer nurses regardless of experience or setting, including resources concerning anti-cancer agents, are available via www.cancerlearning.gov.au.

A nurse must complete education requirements and demonstrate relevant competencies and capacities associated with anti-cancer drug administration prior to administering any anti-cancer drug independently. The education requirements should include theoretical and clinical practice components and incorporate the following topics:

- Cancer cell biology and principles of the development of anti-cancer drugs.
- Principles and safe practice of anti-cancer drug administration.
- Principles of safe cannulation and Central Venous Access Device management.
- Adverse effects and toxicities associated with anti-cancer drugs.
- Assessment for early identification, ongoing monitoring, and principles of prevention and management of adverse effects and toxicities.
- Education and psychological support for persons receiving anti-cancer drugs.
- Ethical and legal issues associated with the administration of anti-cancer drugs.

Nurses should demonstrate a minimum level of theoretical knowledge in each of the above areas and satisfactorily demonstrate practical skills and clinical competence associated with the administration of these anti-cancer drugs, along with the associated care of the patient and their family.

Further education and training for nurses involved in administering anti-cancer drugs should be undertaken when new drugs, protocols or equipment are introduced or when procedures change. A nurse's continuing competence in the administration of anti-cancer drugs and handling of related waste should be maintained through participation in relevant professional development and education activities regularly, ideally on an annual basis.

References

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