More than Medicine

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Background

Historically, cancer had been perceived as a death sentence. For both medical professionals and patients, the focus was on the treatment of the disease (Moser et al., 2014). As time has passed, patient care within oncology has shifted into viewing cancer as a long-term disease. Oncology nurses have the opportunity to have an ongoing relationship with patients, allowing them to be able to address the physical health, emotional wellbeing, and quality of life of patients (Tran et al., 2026). Understanding how nurses perceive this role can provide valuable insight into oncology nursing practices.

Significance

Focusing on the shift of care from solely disease management to supporting the quality of life has helped patients live longer, which aligns with the principles of oncology care (Tran et al., 2026). Further understanding how nurses perceive their role in patients' cancer journeys may reveal how they balance treatment-focused responsibilities with interpersonal relationships, ultimately aimed at improving patients' quality of life. These findings can provide essential information for nursing education, clinical practice guidelines, and healthcare policies that strengthen nurses' capacity to deliver comprehensive, patient-centered cancer care.

Methods

This qualitative project draws from the techniques of ethnography and narrative inquiry. Data was gathered through observation within the environment of care and semi-structured interviews to understand the how the nurses perceive their role in helping patients "live well" throughout their cancer journey. Observations allowed for a view into the processes nurses engage in that focus on quality of life during patient assessment and treatment. Interviews provided insight into how nurses view their role in supporting patients during this complex care trajectory. These transcripts and observations were analyzed to identify recurring themes.

Clinical Question

How do oncology nurses view their role in helping patients live well rather than simply treating cancer?

Findings

Relationships	Nurses take time to learn and note details about a patient beyond their diagnosis	"Sometimes that is all we can do"
Emotional	Nurses can adjust the patient's physical environment to match the emotional needs of the patient	"There are things we can do that speak louder than words for some of these patients...lowering the lights, giving them warm blankets..."
Psychosocial	Social determinants of health	"What can we do to help this one person? How can this lessen the burden of all the 'bigger' things?"



DeMelo, S. (2026). MGBCI [photography]. Personal.

Discussion

Nurses are able to see beyond the patient. Oncology nurses recognize the effect a cancer diagnosis has on the whole patient and use this knowledge to address their quality of life by doing the following:

- Nurses create meaningful relationships with patients, while maintaining professionalism, emphasizing caring for the whole person, not just treating the cancer
- Nurses take the time to adjust their tone, communication style, and the patient's environment based on how the patient is emotionally feeling that day, allowing for trust and empathy to be solidified with their patients
- Nurses take time to address their patients' social determinants of health and evaluate what they, as nurses, can offer to best support the patient

With this being said, nurses provide wholisitic, compassionate care that addresses the broader needs of the patients including their social determinants of health. These findings support the idea that patients are living with cancer, instead of dying from cancer.

Recommendations

- Strengthen education on wholistic, patient-centered oncology nursing that includes significant focus on the patients' mental health and comfort
- Explore ways to standardize and improve ongoing quality of life assessments and target interdisciplinary support throughout treatment

References

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