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# THE ROLE OF THE ADVANCED PRACTICE NURSE IN GERIATRIC ONCOLOGY CARE

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BRIANNA MORGAN AND ELISE TARBI

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**OBJECTIVES:** *To describe how the Advanced Practice Nurse (APN) is uniquely suited to meet the needs of older adults throughout the continuum of cancer, to explore the progress that APNs have made in gero-oncology care, and make suggestions for future directions.*

**DATA SOURCE:** *Google Scholar, PubMed, and CINAHL. Search terms included: “gero-oncology,” “geriatric oncology,” “Advanced Practice Nurse,” “Nurse Practitioner,” “older adult,” “elderly,” and “cancer.”*

**CONCLUSION:** *Over the last decade, APNs have made advances in caring for older adults with cancer by playing a role in prevention, screening, and diagnosis; through evidence-based gero-oncology care during cancer treatment; and in designing tailored survivorship care models. APNs must combat ageism in treatment choice for older adults, standardize comprehensive geriatric assessments, and focus on providing person-centered care, specifically during care transitions.*

**IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING PRACTICE:** *APNs are well-positioned to help understand the complex relationship between risk factors, geriatric syndromes, and frailty and translate research into practice. Palliative care must expand beyond specialty providers and shift toward APNs with a focus on early advanced care planning. Finally, APNs should continue to establish multidisciplinary survivorship models across care settings, with a focus on primary care.*

**KEY WORDS:** *older adult, geriatric oncology, gero-oncology nursing, advanced practice nurse.*

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Older patients with cancer have a major presence in the health care system and present a unique challenge to health care providers (HCPs) because of the complex biological interface between cancer and the aging process.<sup>1,2</sup> To address this complicated physiological effect, older adults often receive highly focused care in specialized oncology practices.<sup>3</sup> However, these older adults are ubiquitous across all care settings. They are seen in primary care for prevention and screening or with early symptoms of disease.<sup>4</sup> They present to the acute care setting with complications of chemotherapy or disease progression and they continue to receive care long after their cancers have been cured.<sup>5,6</sup>

Advanced Practice Nurses (APNs), nurses prepared at the Master’s level for advanced clinical practice, are well suited to meet the challenges of caring for older adult cancer patients across the continuum of cancer care (Fig. 1).<sup>7</sup> APNs are a varied group of HCPs (Certified Registered Nurse Practitioners, Nurse Midwives, Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists, and Clinical Nurse Specialists) who encounter patients at all points in their lifespan, throughout their disease trajectory, and across all care settings (Fig. 2).<sup>8</sup> APNs are unique HCPs in that their care is rooted in

the tenants of nursing. APNs focus on health promotion, which in turn increases preventive care, improves functional status, and allows patients more independence.<sup>9</sup> Patients report higher satisfaction with APN-provided care and ultimately health care cost is less.<sup>9</sup> To improve and standardize APN education related to care of the older adult, the Consensus Model for APN Regulation has defined and required comprehensive geriatric competencies across all Master’s level programs where APNs have clinical contact with older adults.<sup>10-12</sup>

This article explores the evolution of the role of APNs in the care of older adults with cancer over the last decade and critically analyzes how APNs have met the needs of these patients. It also identifies areas for improvement and suggests future directions for the field. It discusses the role of APNs across the continuum of cancer care through: (1) preventive care, screening, and timely diagnosis; (2) oncology and gerontologic-specific care in geriatric oncology clinics and beyond; and (3) throughout survivorship. A thorough review of the literature was performed using Google Scholar, PubMed, and CINAHL. Search terms included: “gero-oncology,” “geriatric oncology,” “Advanced Practice Nurse,” “Nurse Practitioner,” “older adult,” “elderly,” and “cancer.”

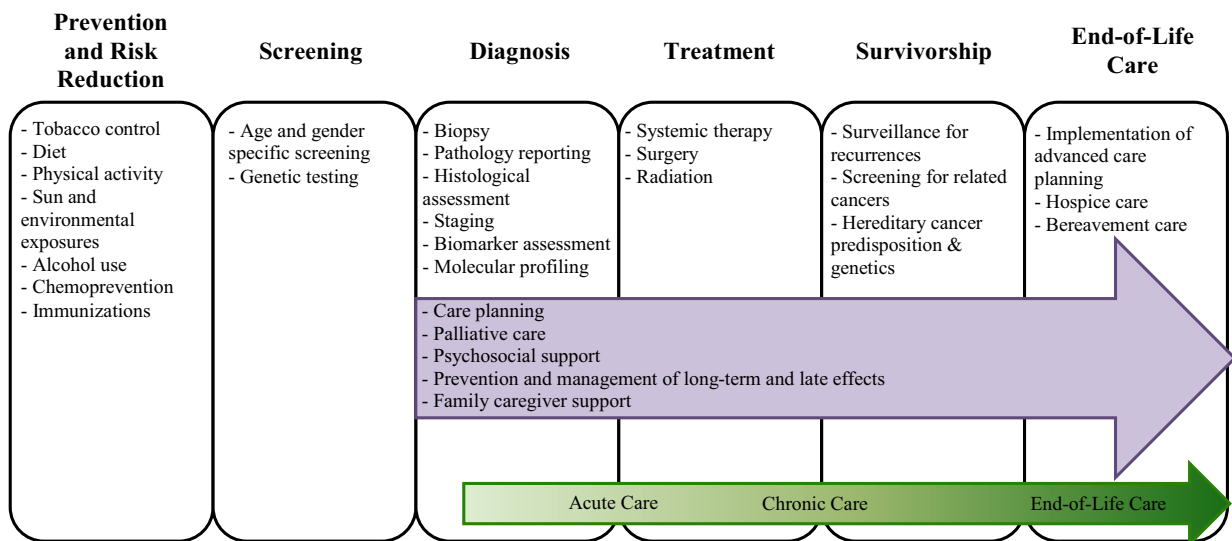


FIGURE 1. Continuum of cancer care. (Adapted with permission. © 2013 by the National Academy of Sciences. All rights reserved.<sup>7</sup>).

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