In the Hot Seat

Lena Sharp
President of the European Oncology Nursing Society

The European Oncology Nursing Society is a pan-European organisation dedicated to the support and development of cancer nursing. It recently completed a landmark research project – RECaN – aimed at increasing recognition of the value and contribution of cancer nursing across Europe. Cancer World asked EONS president Lena Sharp what they learned and why it matters.

Cancer World: Recognition for specialist cancer nursing is clearly important to nurses. Does it matter to patients?

Lena Sharp: The fact that so many countries do not recognise cancer nursing as a speciality and therefore don’t offer specialist training is a big problem for patients. It deprives them of access to cancer nursing competence, such as psychosocial support and symptom management. It also affects their safety. In some countries, nurses with no, or minimal, education in cancer care prepare, administer and monitor complex cancer drugs. We also know from the RECaN project that cancer nurses are less inclined to report errors in countries where they have less recognition.

CW: What did you learn from the project?

LS: From a systematic review, based on 351 papers [Int J Nurs Studies 2018, 86:36-43], we learned that the nursing contribution to cancer care and cancer research is significant and varied: nurses are producing high-quality, innovative and cutting edge research, and nurse-led interventions are increasing in frequency and complexity. The preliminary results of a meta-analysis show that there can be benefits in terms of the quality, no safety concerns and also economic benefits from having nurses rather than physicians leading certain cancer services.

The RECaN project also compared cancer nursing across four different countries – Estonia, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK – and found significant differences regarding tasks, roles, education, responsibilities, autonomy, safety culture and recognition.

CW: What are the hurdles to achieving better recognition of cancer nursing and enabling nurses to contribute more to care across Europe?

LS: A big hurdle, and the hardest one to change, is hierarchical structures in healthcare. These structures strongly
Lena Sharp, RN, PhD, was elected president of the European Oncology Nursing Society in 2017. She is the Head of the Regional Cancer Centre, Stockholm-Gotland, in Sweden. She teaches regularly at nursing schools and postgraduate nursing courses, she has been a faculty member for the annual ESO‒EONS Masterclass in Oncology Nursing for many years, and was the project lead for the EONS Cancer Nursing Education Framework published in 2018.

Prior to taking up her post at the Regional Cancer Centre, Lena Sharp was the chief nursing officer and patient safety coordinator at the Department of Oncology at Karolinska University Hospital. Her main focus in research is patient safety, communication, leadership and cancer care organisation.