



Strengthening Psychosocial Care in Cancer Settings Through Structured Skill Development



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Background

Recognizing, addressing, and treating psychosocial distress is a critical part of high-quality cancer care and improving patient outcomes (Institute of Medicine, 2008). As the main providers of psychosocial care in cancer settings in the U.S., oncology social workers are uniquely positioned to assess and treat psychosocial issues. Defining the specific skills and competencies of oncology social work and developing a training curriculum around these are key tasks in improving cancer care and preparing oncology social workers for the field (Otis-Green, et al, 2015; Zebrack et al., 2022).

Framing the Need

This poster details the process of developing a skill-building curriculum to train new social workers at UT MD Anderson Cancer Center, a comprehensive cancer treatment center in Houston, Texas. The process began based on feedback from staff during our annual Culture of Safety Survey. Nearly half of our staff at the start of this project had less than 3 years of oncology social work experience. Approximately 20% of our staff had less than 5 years of experience and 25% had more than 5 years of experience. The survey responses further detailed that nearly half of our staff lacked comfort in necessary clinical skills such as assessing suicide risk, applying specific counseling modalities, and managing complex family dynamics – including abuse and neglect.

Developing the Curriculum

Our team began by 1) reviewing existing literature on oncology social work competencies and AOSW standards of practice, and 2) conducting further internal surveys of current social workers practicing at UT MD Anderson Cancer Center to elicit perceived gaps in knowledge. Based on these findings, a curriculum was designed consisting of targeted skill-building sessions, each focused on a specific practice area and facilitated by experienced social workers. This structured approach aims to standardize training to enhance clinical proficiency and promote confidence in our social workers and to strengthen psychosocial care delivery for patients with cancer.

Reviewing the Literature



Perlmutter et al. (2022) conducted a survey of AOSW members in order to provide more detail about direct practice behaviors of oncology social workers in the U.S. The study showed that OSWs are generally focused on direct practice including psychosocial assessment, psychotherapy/counseling, assistance with practical needs, resource referrals, and end of life conversations.



Zebrack et al. (2022) set out to identify a range of activities that delineate the Competencies, Opportunities, Roles, and Expertise (CORE) for oncology social work. The Clinical Assessment & Intervention domain (Cluster 1) achieved the highest ratings of importance, with activities related to emotional support, psychosocial assessment, Advance Care Planning, and communication facilitation among the highest.

Implemented Skill Building Curriculum

Skill Topic	Program Objectives
Psychosocial Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learn how to conduct a comprehensive biopsychosocial assessment Develop basic clinical interviewing and documentation skills
Financial Assessment and Resource Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand financial toxicity Learn components of a thorough financial assessment Develop working knowledge of resources to help patients in need
Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security: Understanding the Basics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop basic knowledge of government programs and resources to guide, counsel and refer patients
Advance Care Planning: Supporting Patients' Decision Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand code status, goals of treatment, palliative vs. hospice care, hospice care philosophy, life sustaining treatments and advance directives
Facilitating Goals of Care Conversations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop skills in facilitating patient/family discussions regarding goals of care Learn strategies to elicit values, goals and wishes
Depression & Anxiety in Cancer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand prevalence of depression and anxiety in cancer Know how to interpret screening tools such as PHQ-9, GAD-7, NCCN Distress Thermometer Learn how to formulate a treatment plan
Cancer and Grief	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learn how to conceptualize and assess grief in patients/families Learn basic grief interventions Examine how we manage grief in our role
Complex Family Dynamics, Intimate Partner Violence & Abuse and Neglect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand your role as assessor, counselor, reporter and educator Develop skills in safety planning with patients, caregivers and medical teams
Effective Teamwork: Building Team Relationships through Use of Self, Communication and Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learn about use of self Develop professional communication skills Gain tools and skills to foster successful collaborations with medical teams

Conclusion

The development of a structured, competency-based curriculum for oncology social workers represents a critical step toward strengthening psychosocial care delivery in a complex cancer care environment. Grounded in both national standards and locally identified needs, this initiative addresses clear gaps in clinical skills, confidence, and preparedness among early-career oncology social work practitioners. By incorporating targeted, skill-building sessions led by experienced clinicians, the curriculum promotes consistency in practice, supports professional development, and aligns training with real-world demands of oncology social work.

Ultimately, this approach not only enhances the clinical capabilities and confidence of social workers but also contributes to improved identification and management of psychosocial distress among patients and families. As oncology care continues to evolve, investing in structured training programs such as this is essential to ensuring a competent, confident workforce equipped to deliver high-quality, patient-centered psychosocial care.

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