The History of ONCC

The Oncology Nursing Society (ONS) was founded in 1975 with a primary focus on the education and development of oncology nurses and the specialty of oncology nursing. As ONS grew, the membership became interested in developing a means to formally recognize professional expertise in oncology nursing. In 1981, the ONS Board appointed the Certification Task Force to develop a plan to implement a certification program.

During its early days, the Certification Task Force focused on measuring member interest in certification and the cost of developing and maintaining a certification program. In 1983, they met with more than 800 ONS members during the ONS Annual Congress in San Diego, to identify members’ concerns related to certification. It was clear that certification was a high priority for many of the organization’s members. The ONS Board appointed a Special Committee on Certification, charged with developing a plan to offer an examination in the spring of 1986.

The Special Committee on Certification recommended the creation of the Oncology Nursing Certification Corporation (ONCC), that a certification examination should be developed and offered annually during the ONS Congress, and that the credential should be “Oncology Certified Nurse” or OCN®. The Committee also made recommendations for the initial eligibility criteria for certification. In November 1984, ONCC was incorporated in the state of Pennsylvania and the first board of Directors meeting was convened to finalize the ONCC structure and develop corporate policies.

In 1984 the Core Curriculum Subcommittee began preparing an outline of the basic knowledge required for competent practice in oncology nursing. This outline became the blueprint for the first OCN® Examination. The first Test Development Committee was convened and began writing and referencing the first test questions. In 1985, the American Cancer Society (ACS) awarded ONCC a $35,000 grant for developing a certification program. In addition, ONS loaned ONCC $35,000 in start-up funds (that loan was repaid by 1987).

On April 30, 1986, ONCC administered the first OCN® examination to 1,607 nurses during the ONS Annual Congress in Los Angeles. Of those who took the test, 1,384 (86%) passed.

By the beginning of 1990, there were more than 7,000 oncology certified nurses, and ONCC had hired its first full time staff: a director of certification and a secretary. The certification program was growing rapidly. In 1991, the ONCC Board appointed a task force to explore the feasibility of advanced certification. ONCC obtained accreditation of the OCN® credential from the American Board of Nursing Specialties in 1994. Also in 1994, a role delineation study of advanced oncology nursing practice was
completed and the first Advanced Oncology Certified Nurse (AOCN®) Examination was offered on April 25, 1995. Two hundred fifty six nurses took the examination; 219 passed (86%).

By the late 1990’s, ONCC had increased its efforts to recognize certified nurses. In addition to hosting an annual Recognition Breakfast for Oncology Certified Nurses, ONCC was presenting the OCN® and AOCN® of the Year Awards, as well as the Employer Recognition Award and several chapter awards. To assist nurses in becoming certified, ONCC began offering the Roberta Scofield Memorial Certification Awards in 1998, which consisted of a free registration for a certification test or renewal. Fifty recipients were selected to receive the awards that year.

In 1999, ONCC expanded further, and purchased the Certified Pediatric Oncology Nurse (CPON®) Examination from the Certification Corporation of Pediatric Oncology Nurses. ONCC offered the first CPON® examination in October 1999, during the annual conference of the Association of Pediatric Oncology Nurses (now known as the Association of Pediatric Hematology Oncology Nurses). One hundred eighty three nurses took the first CPON® examination administered by ONCC, and 141 passed (77%).

In 2000, ONCC obtained accreditation from the National Commission for Certifying Agencies, whose purpose is to help ensure the health, welfare, and safety of the public through the accreditation of certification programs/organizations that assess professional competence. At the time, ONCC offered the OCN®, AOCN®, and CPON® credentials. Since then, all ONCC certification programs have obtained NCCA accreditation as soon as eligible, and maintained it continuously.

Also in 2000, ONCC introduced a new certification renewal method, the Oncology Nursing Certification Points Renewal Option (ONC-PRO), which permitted nurses to earn points toward certification renewal by completing professional development activities. Initially, this was available to certified nurses only every other renewal cycle, but in 2002, ONCC began offering the option of renewing certification through ONC-PRO for every certification cycle.

In 2003, ONCC began offering a computer-based testing option for all examinations. Although paper and pencil testing was still an option, 42% of nurses who took a certification test that year opted for computer based testing. Initially, ONCC offered computer-based tests during two 12-day testing windows. The number of test dates increased in 2004 to include four (quarterly) two-week testing windows. The last paper and pencil test was administered in 2007. In 2008, ONCC began offering computer based testing during four (quarterly) month-long testing windows, and year-round test dates for AOCNP® and AOCNS® examinations.

In 2005, following a role delineation study of advanced oncology nursing practice, the ONCC Board decided to offer role-specific advanced certification examinations: the Advanced Oncology Certified Nurse Practitioner (AOCNP®) and Advanced Oncology Certified Clinical Nurse Specialist (AOCNS®). Two hundred sixty eight nurses took the AOCNP® test during its first year; 232 passed (87%). One hundred thirteen nurses took the AOCNS® test in 2005, and 94 passed (83%). With the introduction of the AOCNP® and AOCNS® examinations, the AOCN® credential was placed into retired status, wherein
nurses could maintain the credential through professional development but the test is no longer offered.

In 2009, ONCC began offering the Certified Breast Care Nurse (CBCN®) examination, its first subspecialty certification test. Three hundred eighty one nurses took the CBCN® test in its first year and 329 passed (86%). In 2010, following a role delineation study of pediatric oncology nursing practice, ONCC introduced the Certified Pediatric Hematology Oncology Nurse (CPHON®) examination, bringing its number of certification programs to seven. Five hundred nineteen nurses took the CPHON® examination in 2010, and 374 passed (72%). With the introduction of the CPHON® credential, the CPON® credential was placed into retired status, meaning it could be maintained by nurses through professional development, but the test is no longer offered.

By the start of 2011, there were 30,449 oncology certified nurses, including 25,986 OCN®, 1053 AOCN®, 1,910 CPON®, 315 AOCNS®, 754 AOCNP®, 513 CBCN®, and 374 CPHON®.

1982 Certification Task Force Members
Pearl Moore, Chair
Catherine Hogan
Alice Longman
Joan McNally
Barbara Piper

1983 Special Committee on Certification
Roberta Scofield, Chair
Anne Belcher
Ruth McCorkle
Pearl Moore
Connie Yarbro

1984 ONCC Board of Directors
Roberta Scofield, President
Beverly Nielsen, Secretary
Linda Arenth, Treasurer
Joanne Disch
Robert Frelick
Ruth McCorkle
Joyce Yasko
Judi Johnson, Ex Officio