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What Should Oncology Nurses Know When Caring for Veterans?

Elizabeth A. Delaney

Cedarville University, eadelaney@cedarville.edu

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THE OFFICIAL NEWS MAGAZINE OF THE ONCOLOGY NURSING SOCIETY

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What Should Oncology Nurses Know When Caring for Veterans?

ONS member Elizabeth Delaney, MS, RN, CNS, FNP-BC, OCN®, ACHPN, is the interim program director for the Center for Palliative Care at the Ohio State University's Arthur G. James Cancer Hospital and Richard J. Solove Research Institute.

I first became aware of the unique needs of veterans when I was a member of the board of directors for the Midwest Care Alliance and learned about the great work of the Ohio Hospice Veterans Partnership (OHVP), which helps raise awareness among healthcare providers about veteran needs.

In my experience, many healthcare providers external to the Veterans Health Administration (VA) system are not aware that (according to www.wehonorveterans.org) one of every four hospice patients is a veteran. The belief is that veterans are only cared for in the VA system, and that is simply not true.

Veterans may not feel their military service is appreciated (especially Vietnam veterans) or may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder related to experiences during their military service. Spiritual distress or a lack of spiritual peace at the end of life, resulting from witnessing death during battle, is not unusual. Also, veterans are sometimes eligible for unique benefits that may be overlooked or not investigated.

In my experience, the increased awareness has led to a greater compassion for veteran-specific healthcare needs and an increased sense of patriotism. Veteran-specific initiatives have been implemented at several hospice facilities, including a bedside pin-



ning ceremony for veterans at the end of life. These pinning ceremonies are performed to honor veterans' service to their country and are open to family members and friends. Responses to the ceremony vary, but they usually have a profound effect on the veterans, their families, and even the healthcare providers.

As an experienced palliative care advanced practice nurse, I was surprised at how much I had to learn about veterans and their specific needs. With a little knowledge and the establishment of veteran resources in our community,

small personalized care interventions can positively change the lives of veterans and their families. Most veterans were willing to give their best and, if required, even their lives for us. The least we can do is to help support them, especially at the end of life.

By partnering and collaborating with the VA, healthcare providers can strengthen veteran-centric resources, relationships, and access to programs and partnerships available in their community. The website www.wehonorveterans.org offers many educational and process-related resources. *