Nurse to Know: Krista Wilkins

What is your present role? What do you do in that role?
I am an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Nursing, University of New Brunswick. My primary responsibilities include conducting research, and teaching in classroom and clinical settings.

What drew you into oncology nursing? What influenced you to become an oncology nurse?
I was drawn to oncology nursing because I had a personal experience being a cancer patient as a youth. Much of my youth was spent in hospital. I recognized, from an early age, that it was the nurses who were always available to care for me and my family. The nurses were there to comfort me at night, laughed and cried with me, provided education, managed my symptoms, and helped me recognize my strengths when I could not. I wanted to pursue an oncology nursing career so I could give that same care and attention to cancer patients and their families. I feel that one of the reasons I went through the cancer experience was to better understand what it is to have cancer, so that I can help others in that same position.

How would you characterize or describe the driving force for you regarding your practice as a nurse?
As nurse researcher, I provide a different type of care to cancer patients; I use research to answer questions and seek solutions that enhance quality of life and health outcomes for cancer patients and their families. I have learned so much from the people who participate in my research. It is truly a privilege to hear their stories. My goal is to produce research findings that are useful to cancer patients themselves, and offer direction to health care providers on how to preserve the humanness of patients and families in cancer care. I achieve this goal by conducting research focused on better understanding the perspectives of cancer patients and their families.

What do you find most exciting about being a nurse?
Oncology nurses play a key role in health research in Canada. Nurses think about what works and what does not work. Questioning clinical practice can lead to clinical questions that are amendable for research that can, in turn, inform best practice. Nursing research can affect so many people—cancer patients of today and tomorrow as well as their families. Nursing research contributes knowledge that can work to reduce the healthcare burden for patients as well as the health care delivery system, especially when there is an emphasis on health and wellness.

What have you seen as the biggest changes for nurses over the years of your career?
Over my 13-year nursing career, the biggest change I have seen is that caring for cancer patients and their families has gotten more complicated. Hospitals are understaffed. Budgets are tight. The aging population means the health care system is dealing with an increasing number of complex illnesses, including cancer. Today, oncology nurses are being challenged to embrace change, commit to improving the patient experience, and deliver quality care through innovation.

What do you see are the biggest challenges for oncology nursing/nurses today?
The oncology nursing role is rapidly evolving as registered nurses are tasked with an even wider range of health care responsibilities. They are caregivers, teachers, and advocates. They are publishing research, developing clinical innovations, and actively addressing health care policy. They need to access the most current information possible so their practice is based on the best evidence. This does not mean oncology nurses need to know everything; they just need to be curious, lifelong learners.

What is your greatest hope for the future of oncology nursing?
I see the oncology nursing role expanding beyond acute care setting to include a greater emphasis on holistic health promotion within the community setting. My hope is that oncology nurses will take a lead in helping Canadians receive better access to cancer prevention and screening services, especially for those living in rural or remote communities. I also hope that every oncology nurse will foster evidence-informed care. Remaining current with new developments in the field will make it possible for nurses to influence oncology nursing practice effectively and to develop innovative strategies for managing the care of patients and families. It is important for us to get a handle on what makes oncology nursing valuable and what difference it makes. This knowledge is needed so we can continue to deliver quality care to cancer patients and their families.

What is the best advice you would give to an individual who is considering becoming a nurse/ an oncology nurse?
My advice to those considering becoming an oncology nurse would be to seek out advice from individuals who are already in the profession. There are well-defined practice standards and competencies that may help individuals understand specialized oncology nursing practice (www.cano-acio.ca). In addition, the Canadian Nurses Association has formally recognized oncology nursing as a specialty for registered nurses and offers certification in oncology nursing. There are many other great resources available including formal education through universities offering individual courses or degree programs in oncology nursing. If you are completing a nursing degree program, complete an internship or clinical experience in oncology. Working in oncology can be an opportunity to gain experience working with people with cancer. Another way to learn about the cancer experience is through volunteering with local cancer organizations; they are always looking for people to help with events like the Run for the Cure or Terry Fox Run.

What have you seen as the biggest influence on your career?
As nurse researcher, I provide a different type of care to cancer patients; I use research to answer questions and seek solutions that enhance quality of life and health outcomes for cancer patients and their families.