

## Hematology Pharmacists Are the Ultimate Weapon for Treating Cancer

By Dan Steiber, RPh, Editor in Chief, *Directions in Oncology Pharmacy*®

We often hear that practicing medicine is an art. But developing a treatment plan for hematological cancer turns that art into a science, and trained oncology pharmacists are its ultimate weapon. Patients with cancers of the blood can have various and complex medication needs. Each patient tends to have a unique disorder, and an experienced oncology pharmacy team with knowledgeable experts is essential. Patients often present with hematologic malignancies such as leukemia, myeloma, and lymphoma. Providing pharmacological support for patients with blood cancer is critical, especially during bone marrow transplantation. It is not unusual for 30 or more different drugs to be required. The hematology oncology (HemOnc) pharmacist is responsible for performing a variety of duties for the patient's care team as well as the patient and the family. These duties often include the following:

- Seeing patients with the care team daily
- Consulting colleagues on medication choices and dosages
- Preventing adverse drug reactions and interactions
- Counseling patients and families
- Monitoring drug therapy related to clinical trials

### A Day in the Life of a HemOnc Pharmacist

Pharmacists are members of a team who work with medical and nursing staff to maximize the benefits of drug therapy while trying to minimize its toxicities. It is the job of the HemOnc pharmacist to coordinate the complete medication plan. This often begins with inpatient chemotherapy infusions and transitioning to cancer medications—often dispensed by specialty pharmacy—that must be taken at home.

The HemOnc pharmacist role includes recommending medications to manage the complications of cancer and managing any adverse effects (AEs) from treatment. Given the complexity of the treatment regimens, the HemOnc pharmacist must review the patient's current list of medications, identify any potential drug interactions, and adjust the therapy to manage those interactions. No drug is without its challenges, and oncology pharmacists explain to patients which AEs may occur and assist them in managing these effects. Additionally, oncology pharmacists work closely with a patient's oncologist to achieve the best possible outcome.



The process does not stop there. The oncology pharmacist performs daily evaluations by reviewing medication profiles to ensure each drug is dosed appropriately. This is a fluid process because a cancer patient's physiology is in a dynamic state. The pharmacist must constantly assess the integration of laboratory results, radiology reports, and other concurrent testing, and make adjustments.

### Patient and Caregiver Education

HemOnc pharmacists actively educate patients and their family members about what to expect during chemotherapy so that patients can make informed decisions. Pharmacists also follow up with the health care team to adjust medications if the patient is experiencing AEs from chemotherapy. Several variables come into play when making decisions about treatment to ensure both patients and caregivers are informed about the expected outcomes, AEs, costs of therapy, administration, and monitoring of the hematological drugs. The process begins before these drugs are administered, with the oncology pharmacists meeting face to face (virtually or in person), independently of the oncologist, and must be continually reinforced throughout treatment. The HemOnc pharmacist is the medication expert on the team and should be the primary educator when it comes to drug therapy to guarantee a consistent, informed process.

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has shifted much of this discipline to the telephone or to platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. If a meeting is to take place in person, the HemOnc pharmacist should have a designated and private space, and the timing should be supported by appropriate scheduling with other interactions concerning the patient's treatment. Sessions should cover diagnosis; treatment goals and the duration; scheduling of treatment administration; drug-drug and drug-food interactions; AEs, including frequently reported and rare ones; and self-management strategies.

With the advent of limited-distribution products, patients and caregivers must have information on how to obtain products, and it should include specialty pharmacy's role when necessary. Given the high cost of HemOnc therapies, pharmacists should provide patients with tools and options regarding financial assistance and alternatives, such as patient assistance programs, foundations, and vouchers.

Because this is a stressful time for patients and families, the education process must be supported by written materials that can be taken home and reviewed away from the clinic or hospital. The HemOnc pharmacist should identify appropriate patient educational materials. The materials should accommodate the variability in patients' and caregivers' health literacy and, when appropriate, be translated into the patient's primary language. Given our digital age, the materials should be a blend of written and audiovisual elements.

Limitless, free options are available online that have been developed by various manufacturers, institutions, and quality publications.

### Role of the HemOnc Pharmacist in Drug Research

New products and therapies are being introduced to combat hematological cancers. HemOnc pharmacists are at the center of this process and frequently act as clinician-researchers in addition to carrying out their pharmacy duties. They work directly with patients and their broader oncology team to manage drug selection, monitor AEs, adjust doses, and gather information from patient discussions, various blood samplings, and tumor biopsies. Collecting information must be as thorough as possible to identify new compounds that may be candidates for the evolution of breakthrough therapies or enhance existing approved products.

### Perpetual Education of the HemOnc Pharmacist

The role of the oncology pharmacist is strikingly broad and increasingly complex. Most pharmacy students starting their doctor of pharmacy education have already obtained 1 undergraduate degree. To become a board-certified oncology pharmacist (BCOP) or be recognized as an oncology pharmacist typically entails an additional, dedicated 2 to 4 years of education or training.

The BCOP certification is the most recognized program in the United States for oncology pharmacists. Ultimately, the standard is determined by the individual institution or practice setting, but designating someone "officially" as an oncology pharmacist can be a challenge; roles may vary locally, nationally, internationally, and even individually.

**Source:** <https://www.pharmacytimes.com/view/hematology-pharmacists-are-the-ultimate-weapon-for-treating-cancer>. Accessed April 22, 2021.

## Oncology Pharmacists Are Essential Members of Care Teams to Handle Drug Shortages, Errors

With drug shortages preventing patients from obtaining necessary care and errors presenting major risks for patients with cancer, oncology pharmacists have become trusted and essential members of the patient care team.

An open letter by David DeRemer, PharmD, BCOP, FCCP, FHOPA, the current president of the Hematology/Oncology Pharmacists Association (HOPA), and Susie Liewer, PharmD, BCOP, FHOPA, a past president of HOPA, outlined why oncology pharmacists have become more essential than ever in recent years.

Each practice setting may define the scope of the position and any unique functions its ecosystem requires of the HemOnc pharmacist who works in it. Typically, accredited oncology programs include authentication that the pharmacist can function as the authoritative expert on the optimal use of medications. The pharmacist is the focal point in driving the optimization of oncology patient outcomes, providing evidence-based, patient-centered medication therapy and serving as an integral part of an interdisciplinary oncology team.

Our own Pharmacy Times Continuing Education™ (PTCE) team develops dozens of programs focused on HemOnc training designed to give oncology pharmacists access to educational programs. Many of these training programs offer continuing education (CE) credits and stand on their own.

A good deal of ongoing oncology training and updates are offered live at conferences such as those held by the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists, American Society of Clinical Oncology, and Hematology/Oncology Pharmacy Association. And during the pandemic, our PTCE team has done a sterling job of converting to virtual education. The programs replicate those that would be offered in person but are through a proprietary platform created by PTCE.

Stay tuned to Directions in Oncology Pharmacy for multiple oncology pharmacy education opportunities in 2021.

### Capping off the HemOnc Pharmacist's Role

For patients and caregivers, the start of the HemOnc treatment journey can be fraught with anxiety. It is often compounded by the stress of having to administer medications at home or combine treatment in multiple settings. HemOnc therapies are among the most complex treatments and have problematic schedules, strict administration guidelines, and disruptive AEs.

The HemOnc pharmacist is in the best position to assist patients and caregivers in understanding how to safely take cancer medications. It is a huge responsibility, but for HemOnc pharmacists, it can be one of the most rewarding roles they undertake. ■



"With each new approval and new indication, oncology pharmacists help to bridge the gap between science and real-world medical practice," the letter said.

All these treatments can be overwhelming for patients and their families, especially during the management of AEs. In addition to the normal stress caused by a cancer diagnosis, the letter said the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic presents additional considerations for selecting therapeutic options, monitoring, and supportive care, including integration of vaccines. The letter stated oncology pharmacists bring the expertise necessary to manage all of this.

"Oncology pharmacists are uniquely qualified to provide specialized care to patients with cancer to optimize medication therapy and clinical outcomes," the letter said. "These advanced, focused pharmacists play an integral role in the treatment and supportive care of cancer patients."

Managing such significant AEs is especially important considering the high cost, toxicity, and sensitivity of oncology drugs. In addition to the risks posed to patients, drug shortages and barriers to medication access present serious risks for the larger health care system. These shortages can threaten a patient's safety by resulting in delayed treatments, changed doses or combinations of drugs needed, or missed treatments entirely when drugs are unavailable, according to the National Survey on the Effect of Oncology Drug Shortages in Cancer Care.

When these delays in care occur, oncology pharmacists can help ensure patient safety, making them an integral member of the care team, according to the letter. Drug shortages impact patients, hospitals, and the national health care system, and during a time in which there is increased focus on health care spending, the letter authors said that oncology pharmacists can optimize spending while maintaining quality of care.

"Cancer treatments continue to evolve and improve patients' lives," the letter concluded. "Oncology drug shortages present unique challenges, as many times there are not alternative treatments available. Further policy actions are needed, such as necessary economic incentives to return to a stable and consistent oncology drug supply. Oncology pharmacists play a valuable role in addressing the growing oncology shortages to minimize impact to patient care and optimize medication safety." ■

**Source:** <https://www.pharmacytimes.com/view/oncology-pharmacists-are-essential-members-of-care-teams-to-handle-drug-shortages-errors>. Accessed April 21, 2021.

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