

“You work with people with cancer? That must be so difficult....”

This is a phrase so many physiotherapists working in cancer care hear. We would like to tell you why a career in this field is so rewarding, both professionally and personally.

What is Acute Oncology?

Acute Oncology refers to the management of the unexpected care needs of the patient with cancer, including emergency situations and the acutely unwell patient. Management of patients is carried out in the acute hospitals by a multidisciplinary team who will address all the needs of the patient. Rapid access onto an acute oncology ward is available for patients under an Oncologist and those patients with a new diagnosis of cancer where the primary is unknown. Support and advice is offered to help make decisions about treatment during the acute episode of illness. Physiotherapists also work with patients with a cancer diagnosis in an outpatient setting, providing ongoing treatment for those living with and beyond cancer.

A typical day for a Physiotherapist in Oncology

Every day is different when working in acute oncology. There will be a variety of different patients admitted with acute problems that will require immediate medical management. Referral to physiotherapy could be due to mobility issues that are either related to their sudden deterioration in health or may have been an ongoing issue for some time. It could also be due to respiratory problems – be it sputum retention caused by a chest infection or management of breathlessness. Patients can be transferred from other hospitals for specialist care including radiotherapy for spinal cord compression. Input from physiotherapy along with other members of the MDT is vital to ensure safe discharge home and onward care.

In an outpatient setting, oncology patients may be seen for treatment, advice and support for issues such as restriction in movement after surgery or pain management.

Professional Opportunities in Oncology

The role of the physiotherapist in oncology provides an exciting and diverse opportunity. Physiotherapy is recognized as an important part of the MDT in oncology, not only to assess and treat acute changes but also to support with the longer term effects of cancer and its treatment. Every oncology service is different and often lends itself to continual development, making it a really exciting area to work in where services can be tailored to the needs of the patient. With strong links being made between specialty sites, there is plenty of support and discussion available.

Personal Benefits of Working in Oncology

Being able to help someone to fulfill their wishes at any point in the disease process is hugely rewarding, be it regaining their mobility following a hospital admission post treatment, being able to manage their breathlessness to allow them to go out and socialise or to return home to die. Whilst at times it can be emotionally tough, you will always be surrounded by a team who share your passion and drive to deliver an excellent service.

What Skills are needed in a Physiotherapist in Oncology?

- Good communication skills, intuition and compassion to support people with challenging decisions.
- Ability to use problem solving skills and think outside the box.
- Being dynamic and flexible to adapt to different working environments and conditions.
- Capacity to be a generalist and a specialist - high levels of knowledge and skill, but able to apply these to a wide range of conditions and comorbidities.
- Be able to work as part of team to help to deliver gold standard care

The Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Oncology and Palliative Care is a professional network of the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, which aims to support members working within these specialities, promote the role of physiotherapy and influence policy at local and national levels. If you would like to know more about Physiotherapy in Oncology and Palliative Care, please visit our website <http://acpopc.csp.org.uk/>

References

- 1) <http://www.christie.nhs.uk/services/a-to-h/acute-oncology> (accessed September 20th 2017)