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The COVID-19 pandemic and UKONS role within it

1. How did you first get involved with UKONS, and what drew you to it?

I was involved with UKONS as a cancer nurse for a number of years without being an active member. After working with Dr Verna Lavender as my university supervisor and then on a number of projects she asked me to consider applying for a board role. In addition to this I was working as a Nurse Consultant and was advised by my manager to try and 'get out more' and expand my horizons. In 2018 I was elected to the board.

From the moment I attended my first face-to-face board meeting arrived I knew I was in the right place. A real hot-bed of debate, intellectual challenge and service development all around nursing

2. How has UKONS influenced your career?

UKONS has had an amazingly positive effect on my career. For the first time I was able to have influence outside of my organization. I had access to new ideas via the Lead cancer Nurse MIG and Board Meetings.

I was involved with a lot of education work and had the opportunity to be lead editor on a book for the first time which taught me a lot.

I suppose the defining event of my UKONS career was the COVID-19 pandemic. I was the president-elect (Working with Dr Verna Lavender as president) when the pandemic hit.

Within a week or so at the end of March 2020, lockdown was announced, my mother contracted COVID and died in Spain (unable to go out there – obviously), Verna was very sick with COVID and there was so much madness happening at work.

I suppose at that point I decided to just try and 'do' something rather than wait around feeling bad. I was angry with the virus and wanted to hit back. At that point I knew I had to step up with the support of the UKONS board. After asking around about what would be useful to our members, we united with Macmillan and upped Breaking News to a weekly publication with a big emphasis on 'COVID and Cancer' news. We were fortunate that Media1, as our secretariat were used to running virtual meetings so we were able to make decisions quickly and move our 2020 conference to virtual very swiftly and were really a 'market leader' in this.

During the COVID pandemic our UKONS membership pretty much doubled and I know that cancer nurses valued what we did. When Verna got back to work later in 2020 we were a fully functioning board and team working virtually and were really on top of it. Despite my personal sadness and loss associated with this time I know we did a great job...which I find very comforting, particularly as my mum was a senior nurse herself and would have been so proud.

3. In what ways has supported your cancer nursing career?

I think it has been vital. I have been given the tools, contacts and opportunity to be a nursing leader and contribute in ways I would not have thought possible before board membership. I have contributed to books, presented to parliament and been involved in campaigns to help further cancer nursing

None of this would have happened without UKONS. I certainly would not have been presented with the MBE without the support of my colleagues in my workplace but also at UKONS. So I would recommend getting involved with UKONS as much as possible. Your experience will be different from mine...but just as valuable.