



## Bridging the Gap: The Seven Roles of a Sarcoma Nurse Navigator in a Resource-Limited Setting

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### ABSTRACT

Sarcomas are rare cancers that pose complex treatment and psychosocial challenges, particularly in resource-constrained settings like the Philippines. Navigation plays a vital role in bridging gaps in care delivery. This article aims to define and describe the roles of a Sarcoma Nurse Navigator in a Philippine tertiary referral hospital and evaluate how these roles align with existing global literature. Using personal narrative and experience-based reflection, the authors identified seven core roles performed by the Sarcoma Nurse Navigator. The identified roles include: (1) Advocacy and Assessment, (2) Bridge to the Multidisciplinary Team (MDT), (3) Care Coordination, (4) Data Management, (5) Emotional Support, (6) Follow-up Care, and (7) Guidance for Resource Mobilization and Access Support. These roles reflect the different challenges cancer patients face in the Philippine setting and may serve as a template for other navigation programs in the country.

**Keywords.** sarcoma, nurse navigator, patient navigation, cancer care, resource-limited setting, multidisciplinary care

### INTRODUCTION

Sarcomas are rare types of cancer that start in the body's connective tissues, mainly nerves, muscles, fat, fibrous tissues, and bones. They can be difficult to identify and often require a complex combination of treatments such as surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. As such, patients diagnosed and treated for sarcomas encounter significant challenges not just to their physical and mental wellbeing, but also to their family and interpersonal relationships.<sup>1,2</sup> In our country, these problems are further exacerbated due to the financial toxicity and inequity of healthcare that cancer patients experience.<sup>3</sup> Strategies to increase and sustain patients' access to effective diagnostics and treatment therefore become crucial to achieving good outcomes.

The concept of patient navigation was started in 1990 to improve cancer outcomes by eliminating barriers to timely diagnosis and treatment.<sup>4</sup> By serving as a bridge between the patient and their clinicians, navigators facilitate understanding of the disease, coordinate care, give emotional support and guide through the whole cancer journey.

Since then, multiple studies using navigation have shown improvements in cancer programs uptake and patient outcomes.<sup>5-8</sup> In some countries, cancer care systems are required to use patient navigation for accreditation (i.e., American College of Surgeons Commission on Cancer).<sup>9</sup>

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In the Philippines, the National Integrated Cancer Control Act of 2019 Sec.9 F lists cancer-focused patient navigation as one of the key activities to provide individualized support during the cancer journey, facilitating access to information and resources as needed, throughout the continuum of cancer care.<sup>10</sup>

With all these advantages, the roles of cancer patient navigators still need to be defined.<sup>11</sup> A one-size-fits-all strategy may not be appropriate for patients with sarcoma, as their ages and histopathologic diagnoses vary widely, requiring different treatment strategies. A significant number of sarcomas occur in adolescents and young adults (AYA), an age group with unique psychosocial concerns.<sup>12</sup>

This article aims to present the roles and responsibilities of a Sarcoma Nurse Navigator in a tertiary government referral hospital in the Philippines through personal narration [JMG] and compare these with the literature on patient navigation. The seven roles shown here may serve as templates for use by navigators in the Philippine cancer care setting.

## SEVEN ROLES OF A SARCOMA NURSE NAVIGATOR

“Patient navigation is a more compassionate and structured way to help people deal with these problems [cancer]. The principle behind patient navigation is to ensure that no one should have to deal with cancer alone. It helps people and their families understand, access, and navigate through the healthcare system. This is where the sarcoma nurse navigator comes in. They are at the heart of the care team, assisting patients medically and emotionally through the uncertainties of diagnosis and the numerous phases of treatment and follow-up.

“The nurse navigator is not just a passive assistant; they change things for the better. They push for immediate care, collaborate with specialists, support families coping with psychological issues, and help them rise above financial or logistical problems. Most importantly, they are there for patients to ensure that no one falls through the gaps.

“Treatment abandonment continues to be a catastrophic consequence of an already overburdened healthcare system. The patient who may have been overwhelmed, scared, or unable to pay for the next step. Abandonment may be the difference between survival and disadvantage for people with sarcoma. Misinformation, emotional weariness, vast travel distances, and financial difficulties often cause people to quietly stop receiving medical treatment.

“Nurse navigators play an important role in preventing this. They notice when patients are missing appointments, they reach out when silence grows, and they intervene with empathy. They explain, support, and stand in the gap between the system and the patient. With the following strategies, the story doesn’t have to end early...”

### 1. Advocacy and assessment

“The nurse navigator is often the first to welcome a patient into the cancer care journey. Through warm thorough assessments, they get to know the patient not just as a case, but as a person with fears, hopes, and a life interrupted by illness. They evaluate physical symptoms, emotional well-being, and social needs, and advocate for quick access to tests, specialists, or referrals. Persistent follow-up by a skilled nurse navigator can literally mean the difference between early and late-stage treatment.”

Patient navigators are often the first point of contact upon hospital referral or visit for suspicion of cancer.<sup>11,12</sup> Navigators with relevant clinical experience, such as nurse specialists or nurse consultants, can help explain diagnosis and treatment as well as advocate for early consult for any concerns.<sup>11,13,14</sup>

### 2. Bridge to the Multidisciplinary Team (MDT)

“Sarcoma care demands the expertise of many specialists. The nurse navigator ensures that every voice on the care team is heard and that the patient’s preferences are included. They help present cases at tumour board meetings and follow through on each recommendation. In systems where delays or gaps in communication are common, their presence brings alignment and focus to what can otherwise feel like a maze of appointments.”

Sarcomas require multidisciplinary care from many clinical specialties which is coordinated through regular MDT meetings. Having navigators present in the MDT helps as they relay and explain findings to patients and their families and facilitate necessary diagnostic and treatment referrals.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Care coordination

“Navigating cancer care is like crossing a bridge that keeps shifting, involving lab tests, surgeries, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, rehabilitation. Nurse navigators make sure each step happens in the right order and on time. They coordinate across departments, clarify instructions, and ensure that patients fully understand what’s ahead. Their coordination prevents abandonment, reduces stress, and keeps hope alive when the process becomes too confusing or tiring.”

A recent study at the Philippine General Hospital showed that incorporating a dedicated patient navigator reduces the rate of treatment abandonment in high-grade osteosarcoma patients, ranging from 50% before navigation to only 6% after it was implemented.<sup>8</sup> This real-world experience highlights the significant effect of navigation models in resource-constrained settings, as well as the critical role of navigators in keeping patients on track for curative therapy.

### 4. Data management

“Though often unseen, the data work of nurse navigators is just as important. In the Philippines, where cancer docu-

mentation is often lacking, navigators build records that help track a patient's journey and improve care over time. They log visits, update charts, and support research projects making sure every patient's experience contributes to better outcomes for others."

Some functions of hospital-based navigators, such as follow-up tracking and scheduling, are often passed to community-based navigators, although there can be considerable overlap.<sup>15</sup> In resource-limited settings, patient navigators may expand their scope of work as the need arises. Care should be taken that the additional work does not prevent them from their principal duty of guiding and supporting patients.<sup>4</sup>

## 5. Emotional support

"Cancer is not just a medical battle—it's an emotional one. Patients with sarcoma may face amputation, disability, or dramatic changes to their body image. Nurse navigators offer a steady presence. They listen, comfort, and connect patients to mental health resources, support groups, or simply a shoulder to lean on. Their support is especially critical for young patients, who often struggle with identity, fear, and uncertainty."

Effective listening and communication are crucial skills that cancer navigators need to fulfil their roles.<sup>12,16</sup> Cancer care can be very stressful for patients and their families. Navigators play an important role in accompanying them to finish the journey.<sup>14</sup>

## 6. Follow-up care

"Finishing treatment doesn't mean the end of the journey. Recurrence is a real possibility, and life after sarcoma can be filled with lingering side effects and anxiety. Navigators help schedule follow-ups, track test results, and stay in touch with patients to ensure they feel supported even after hospital visits grow less frequent. They help patients return to school or work and support caregivers during the long road of survivorship."

Using patient navigators have shown better follow-up rates and post-operative care following cancer treatment.<sup>6,8</sup>

## 7. Guidance for resource mobilization and access support

"In a country where many patients pay out-of-pocket for care, the cost of sarcoma treatment can be crushing. Nurse navigators help families find financial aid, transportation, housing, or even prostheses. They understand the barriers patients face and work tirelessly to help overcome them, turning a system that can seem indifferent into one that feels human and reachable."

Cancer navigators improve access to healthcare systems and treatment especially in low-resource settings.<sup>5,7</sup> Navigators

can also guide patients towards funding aid agencies and appropriate clinical trials.<sup>14,17</sup>

## SUMMARY

"My experience as a Sarcoma Nurse Navigator at the University of the Philippines Manila – Philippine General Hospital has shown how essential this role is in guiding patients through every stage of their cancer journey. From triaging patients at their first consultation to coordinating sarcoma rounds and supporting recovery after complex surgeries, navigation brings structure and compassion to a complex system. Nurse navigators do more than coordinate; they stand with patients through their most difficult moments. In overburdened systems, they enhance the human element of care."

As part of a multidisciplinary team, nurse navigators can reduce delays, strengthen communication, and build trust between patients, their families, and the clinical team. Especially in systems with limited resources, navigators can help patients complete their treatment and improve continuity of care. The different roles and responsibilities listed here reflect the unique challenges Philippine cancer patients face and can serve as a template for navigation programs in the country.

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## STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP

All authors certified fulfilment of ICMJE authorship criteria.

## CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

**JMG:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data Curation, Writing – original draft preparation, Writing – review and editing, Visualization, Project administration; **CLLG:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Resources, Data Curation, Writing - original draft preparation, Writing – review and editing, Supervision; **EHMW:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Resources, Writing - original draft preparation, Writing – review and editing, Supervision.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Datasets generated and analyzed are included in the published article.

## AUTHOR DISCLOSURE

Dr. Gaston is an Editorial Board member of the Philippine Journal of Orthopaedics (PJO). The other authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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