

A Brief History of Oncology Patient Navigation

From screening through survivorship, cancer patient navigation removes barriers and boosts care. To learn more, read our related feature story “[How Patient Navigators Can Help You Get Through a Cancer Journey](#).” Here’s how the field has evolved.

December 9, 2024 By [Bob Barnett](#)

1989: The American Cancer Society (ACS) releases a report on challenges to reducing cancer survival disparities among poor people.

1990: Harold P. Freeman, MD, with ACS support, starts the nation’s first patient navigation program at the Harlem Hospital Center. “No person with cancer should have to spend more time fighting their way through the cancer care system than fighting the disease,” he writes.

1994: Linda Burhansstipanov, founder of the Native American Cancer Research Corp, launches the Native Sisters Program to support patients across the cancer continuum.

2001: President’s Cancer Panel recommends funding to support community-based patient navigator programs. Private foundations contribute.

2005: The ACS launches its first patient navigator program. A national law authorizes federal grants to hire and train navigators, and the National Cancer Institute (NCI) begins a five-year study of effectiveness at eight sites.

2007: Freeman launches the Harold P. Freeman Patient Navigation Institute to train patient navigators.

2009: The Academy of Oncology Nurse Navigators (AONN) forms; in 2013, it changes its name to the Academy of Oncology Nurse & Patient Navigators (AONN+) in recognition of the contribution on nonclinical navigators.

2010: The Affordable Care Act establishes a navigator program to help enrollment and extends the national patient navigator program.

2012: The results of the NCI study initiated in 2005 show that patient navigation “shortens the critical time from abnormal findings to diagnosis and treatment in poor populations and also increases the number of people coming to a center for screening,” writes Freeman. The Commission on Cancer releases accreditation standards for patient navigation, establishing it as a standard of care.

2016: The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation releases a cancer care model that includes patient navigation as a required component. AONN+ launches certification for both oncology nurse navigators and oncology patient navigators.

2017: The National Navigation Roundtable launches to improve access to quality care through patient navigation.

2024: Medicare provides specific codes to allow reimbursement for oncology navigation. The Biden administration’s Cancer Moonshot initiative announces that seven major health insurance companies will pay for navigation services, and 40 comprehensive cancer centers and community oncology practices begin using new codes for reimbursement.