

## Abstract

# Nurse Researchers in Italian Oncology IRCCSs: Mapping, Roles, and Development Perspectives

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**Citation:** Colonna, G., Centrone, A., & Morelli, C. (2026). Nurse researchers in Italian oncology IRCCSs: Mapping, roles, and development perspectives. *International Journal of Health Supplements*, 1(Suppl. 2), 154–155. <https://doi.org/10.82051/ijhs-2026-Suppl2>

 Winner of the Early Bird Abstract Award

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**Introduction.** Nursing research in Italy is consolidating through the national collective labour agreement (CCNL); however, the roles of Clinical Research Nurse (CRN) and Nurse Researcher (NR) overlap without a formal distinction within oncology IRCCSs. This ambiguity may limit professional development and independent scientific output. The aim of this study was to describe the presence, roles, and development perspectives of Nurse Researchers in Italian oncology IRCCSs, assessing the distinction between NR and CRN roles and identifying professional development needs.

**Methods.** A descriptive mixed-methods study was conducted. The quantitative component involved mapping CRNs and NRs across 10 oncology IRCCSs using institutional requests, administrative sources, and publicly available documents, with data updated to June 1, 2024. The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews with all four NRs identified nationally, exploring educational background, research activities, critical issues, and future perspectives. Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis.

**Results.** Sixty-one CRNs and four NRs were identified, with NRs present in only two oncology IRCCSs. All NRs acted as Principal Investigators and held advanced qualifications, including two PhDs and two specialist Master's degrees. The main challenges identified were limited organisational support, unclear role definition, heterogeneous contractual arrangements, and difficulties balancing clinical and research activities. Priority areas for development included institutional recognition, dedicated career pathways, a nationally standardised job description, and greater alignment with European models for the professionalisation of the NR role.

**Discussion.** Nurse Researchers represent an emerging but not yet formally structured professional profile within Italian oncology IRCCSs. Institutions that have introduced this role demonstrate an innovative approach, although significant systemic barriers remain. Operational definition of the NR role, alongside standardisation of the CRN profile, represents a strategic priority for advancing autonomous nursing research and strengthening its integration within the Italian National Health Service oncology system. Future developments should include national guidelines and dedicated

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educational pathways.

**Keywords:** Nurse Researcher, Nurse Research, Public Oncology Hospital IRCCS

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**Funding:** This research received no external funding. **Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.