Perceptions of Distress in Women With Ovarian Cancer

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The diagnosis of ovarian cancer is unexpected and devastating for women and their families. Diagnosis may be complicated and delayed with the initial symptoms attributed to nonspecific physical and emotional conditions, such as fatigue, gastrointestinal and genitourinary alterations, menstrual irregularities, depression, and stress (Goff, Mandel, Muntz, & Melancon, 2000). Only 15% of women are diagnosed at an early stage when ovarian cancer is most responsive to treatment; 61% are diagnosed when the cancer is distant or metastasized. The relative five-year survival rate for all stages of ovarian cancer is 46%. Ovarian cancer is the fifth-leading cause of cancer-related death among women, but it accounts for only 5% of all cancer diagnoses in women in the United States (American Cancer Society, 2014).

Background and Significance

Results of research have suggested that women with ovarian cancer experience distress at multiple time points in the disease trajectory (Cain et al., 1983; Dawson, 1993; Lobchuk & Bokhari, 2008; Matulonis et al., 2008; Norton et al., 2004, 2005; Portenoy, Kornblith, et al., 1994; Portenoy, Thaler, et al., 1994). Qualitative studies have reported women’s perspectives related to ovarian cancer diagnoses (Ferrell et al., 2005; Ferrell, Smith, Cullinane, & Melancon, 2003a, 2003b; Fitch, Deane, Howell, & Gray, 2002; Ponto, Ellington, Mellon, & Beck, 2010; Power, Brown, & Ritvo, 2008; Reb, 2007; Schulman-Green et al., 2012), including the challenges of late diagnosis and the treatment regimen (Ferrell et al., 2003b), communication difficulties with healthcare providers (Fitch et al., 2002), and concerns about the effect of the diagnosis on their loved ones (Ferrell, Smith, Ervin, Itano, & Melancon, 2003). In a systematic literature review, Arden-Close, Gidron, and Moss-Morris (2008) examined psychological distress, specifically anxiety and depression, and concluded that emotional distress was a part of the experience for many women with ovarian cancer, particularly younger women and women diagnosed at a later stage.

The diagnosis and treatment of ovarian cancer may initiate profound effects to physiological, psychological,