Symptoms, Coping, and Quality of Life in Pediatric Brain Tumor Survivors: A Qualitative Study

Gail Macartney, RN(EC), PhD, CON(C), Dawn Stacey, RN, PhD, CON(C), Margaret B. Harrison, RN, PhD, and Elizabeth VanDenKerkhof, RN, DrPH

Pediatric brain tumors are the most common solid neoplasm in children (Faria, Rutka, Smith, & Kongkham, 2011). From 2001–2005, 4,181 children aged 0–14 years were diagnosed with cancer in Canada, and 676 died from this disease (Ellison, De, Mery, & Grundy, 2009). The incidence of primary pediatric brain tumors is about 2.76–4.28 cases per 100,000 children (Maher & Raffel, 2004). As more children survive cancer, the need for long-term monitoring and follow-up care continues to grow (Ellison et al., 2009).

Current management strategies for children diagnosed with brain tumors aim to optimize long-term survival in children with high-risk tumors, while maintaining high survival rates in children with low-risk disease (Pollack, 2011). Treatment for pediatric cancers usually involves one or more of three main modalities: localized surgical resection, radiation therapy, and/or chemotherapy. The trend in neurosurgery for pediatric neuro-onclogic conditions has been toward less invasive procedures and non-surgical interventions, where possible (Mainprize, Taylor, & Rutka, 2000), because treatment toxicities are cumulative (Eiser, 2004). The outcomes for children diagnosed with and treated for cancer are largely dependent on host factors, the type of cancer diagnosed, timing, and treatments received (Bhatia & Landier, 2005). Aggressive therapy often is needed to cure this potentially lethal disease; however, late effects, such as injury to the developing brain, remain a profound concern (Walter & Hilden, 2004).

With surgical resection, craniospinal irradiation, and chemotherapy, cure rates as high as 85% can be achieved in average-risk cases; however, improved survival can affect quality-of-life (QOL) outcomes in survivors (Gottardo & Gajjar, 2008). Survivorship is conceptualized as the phase of cancer care that begins after the completion of definitive therapy (Grunfeld & Earle, 2010). Brain tumor survivors include children and youth who have completed treatment for a brain tumor and who have received surgery, chemotherapy and/or radiation therapy. Cure from this disease can come at a high price in terms of late effects that may impair long-term QOL (Pollack, 2011). Treatment for children with brain tumors can result in many neurologic complications, such as neurocognitive problems that can affect daily function (Monje & Fisher, 2011). Brain tumors and their treatments in children result...