Concerns Across the Survivorship Trajectory: Results From a Survey of Cancer Survivors

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The National Cancer Institute ([NCI], 2011) estimated that more than 12 million cancer survivors live in the United States. The number of cancer survivors is growing because of advances in early detection, diagnosis, treatment, and care. The five-year relative survival rate for adults with cancer is greater than 67%, an increase from 49% in 1975–1977 (American Cancer Society, 2012). In addition, the number of people diagnosed with cancer is expected to almost double by the year 2050 because of an aging population (Edwards et al., 2002).

The National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship ([NCCS], 1996) was the first organization to introduce the term cancer survivor and define it as an individual from the time of cancer diagnosis through the balance of his or her life. The NCI’s (2004) Office of Cancer Survivorship added that family members, friends, and caregivers are included in this definition as secondary survivors. Cancer survivorship is a dynamic process of living with, through, and beyond a diagnosis of cancer, regardless of the outcome (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004).

Current literature documents that cancer survivors deal with a myriad of acute, chronic, and late effects of cancer and treatment. They face a host of physical, psychological, emotional, social, spiritual, and economic effects. Therefore, research is needed to better understand the complex needs of survivors.

As many as 75% of cancer survivors have health deficits related to their treatment (Haylock, 2006). Baker, Denniston, Smith, and West (2005) investigated concerns of 752 survivors one year after diagnosis and reported that 57%–68% expressed fears related to disease recurrence and concerns about their future. Sixty-seven percent of the survivors surveyed were dealing with physical effects such as fatigue, loss of strength, sleep difficulties, and sexual dysfunction. Studies have shown that patients with cancer have an elevated risk for psychosocial distress and other problems based on disease factors, gender, age, marital status, ethnicity, and household income (Baker et al., 2005; Vachon, 2006). Harrington, Hansen, Moskowitz, Todd, and Feuerstein (2010) conducted a review of the evidence of symptom burden following primary cancer treatment and found that cancer survivors can experience symptoms for more than 10 years following treatment.