The Impact of Interlink Community Cancer Nurses on the Experience of Living With Cancer

Doris Howell, RN, MScN, Margaret Fitch, RN, PhD, and Brenda Caldwell, RN, BSN

Purpose/Objectives: To describe the impact of expert oncology nursing support provided by an independent nursing service, Interlink Community Cancer Nurses, on patients’ experience of living with cancer.

Design: Qualitative research design guided by hermeneutic phenomenology using a broad data-generating statement.

Setting: Homes of participants in a metropolitan city.

Sample: Purposive sampling was used to select participants for the study. Eighteen women and two men with a variety of cancer diagnoses and living circumstances participated in the study. Accrual was stopped when data saturation occurred.

Main Research Variables: Patients’ perceptions of the experience of receiving care in the home setting from expert oncology nurses.

Findings: Seven core themes described the participants’ perceptions of and the impact of expert oncology nursing care on their experience of living with cancer.

Conclusions: Expert oncology nursing support in the community is perceived by people living with cancer as having a significant impact on their experience and influencing their well-being and survival. The knowledge and experience of oncology nurses and the way in which care is delivered are critical elements. Further research should continue to explore the relationship between expert community oncology nursing support and healthcare outcomes for people with cancer.

Implications for Nursing: Community nursing agencies need to examine their ability to ensure access to knowledgeable and experienced oncology nurses who can support and address the needs of people with cancer across the cancer trajectory.

Key Points . . .

➤ A diagnosis of cancer is a life-changing experience, and patients need support in making the day-to-day adjustments necessary in living with cancer.

➤ The knowledge and experience of expert oncology nurses provide patients with a sense of security and stability in dealing with cancer.

➤ The way that nurses deliver oncology nursing support may make patients with cancer feel that their nurses are more a part of their cancer experience.

➤ Access to oncology nurses is an important element in supportive care and the quality of care of patients with cancer and their families.

Cancer changes everything” is a statement frequently used by people diagnosed with cancer to describe the profound impact that cancer has on their lives (Eick-Swigart, 1995). The cancer experience creates a sense of uncertainty, apprehension, fear, and anxiety and can disrupt every aspect of life for patients and their families, challenging their psychological, social, spiritual, and financial resources (Fitch, 1996). Individuals try to make sense of what is happening to them and struggle to integrate the demands of cancer treatment, making small and massive adjustments to their everyday lives in the face of the disruption the disease brings (Corner, 1997). These adjustments may include changing the way they view themselves, their lives, and their relationships; reexamining values; and addressing fears and concerns.

Nurses play a significant role in facilitating patients’ ability to make the adjustments required to meet the challenges of cancer and its treatment. The nature of the interaction between nurses and their patients may have a profound influence on shaping the cancer experience. The therapeutic nature of nursing, in which nurses are able to acknowledge patients’ distress, accept it, and make it more tolerable, may have a significant impact on patients’ cancer experience (Corner, 1997).

The structure and delivery of community nursing services emphasize the technologic, instrumental aspects of nursing care with eligibility for access to care and payment based on medical care needs. Therapeutic elements of nursing care, which support patients in making the necessary adjustments to a diagnosis of cancer and facilitate recovery and adaptation, may receive less emphasis in the allocation of community nursing support. Community nurses are expected to provide care to patients with many differing diagnoses and may have varying levels of expertise in the care of patients with cancer. In many provinces throughout Canada, nursing care services are brokered through a government-funded homecare program with strict eligibility...