Religious and Spiritual Variables in Three Major Oncology Nursing Journals: 1990–1999

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A diagnosis of cancer frequently creates fear and uncertainty that can provoke a spiritual crisis for patients. Cancer, among the most feared of all diseases, is the product of cumulative and environmental factors that place everyone at risk. Cancer is the second leading cause of death in the United States, resulting in about 1,500 fatalities a day (American Cancer Society [ACS], 2002). The five-year survival rate of all cancers combined is 62%, and 8.9 million people are living with cancer (ACS).

The concepts of religion and spirituality and their relationship to health were discussed widely in the nursing literature during the 1990s (Berggren-Thomas & Griggs, 1995; Hall, 1997; Mickley, Carson, & Soeken, 1995; Oldnall, 1995; Sumner, 1998). The concept of spirituality generally is regarded as being broader than religion, encompassing the need to find meaning in life, death, and suffering; transcendence; and a sense of connectedness with one’s self, other people, and higher powers. Although religious beliefs and practices are considered to be expressions of spirituality, spirituality can be expressed apart from traditional religious beliefs and activities (Emblen, 1992; Peri, 1995; Sumner). However, religion may be the primary way or even the only way in which many people express their spirituality (Forbes, 1994; Roberts & Messenger, 1993).

Patients with cancer have been found to focus increasingly on religious and spiritual issues as their illness becomes more severe. Roberts, Brown, Elkins, and Larson (1997) reported that half of the women they studied with various stages of cancer said they had become more religious and none said they had become less religious since their diagnosis. McMillan and Weitzner’s (2000) study of end-stage patients with cancer also found that patients placed great emphasis on religion and spirituality. When asked what helped them to maintain their quality of life, patients most often

Key Points . . .

➤ A review of all research published in three major oncology nursing journals between 1990 and 1999 found that nursing studies in this field were substantially more likely to explore religion and spirituality than similar research reviews in medicine, psychology, or other healthcare fields.

➤ Overall, nearly 17% of all research studies published between 1990 and 1999 in Oncology Nursing Forum, Cancer Nursing, and the Journal of Pediatric Oncology Nursing examined some aspect of religion or spirituality.

➤ Religion and spirituality were significantly more likely to be examined by qualitative rather than quantitative studies in oncology nursing between 1990 and 1999.

➤ Nursing researchers have found that it is common for patients and their caregivers to spontaneously mention that religion and spirituality are important to them in dealing with cancer.