Breast cancer is a serious healthcare problem and a major public health challenge in the United States and countries throughout the Western Hemisphere (Mettlin, 1999). The American Cancer Society (2002) estimated that 203,500 new cases of breast cancer will be diagnosed and about 39,600 will die from the disease in the United States in 2002.

A great deal of research has been generated about the psychosocial impact of breast cancer diagnosis and treatment, as well as methods to enhance adjustment to the disease. In their comprehensive review, Glanz and Lerman (1992) cited a number of factors that mediated the psychosocial implications of breast cancer. They identified information and participation in decision making as problematic for women and suggested that more research was needed to facilitate women’s decision-making abilities. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore and describe the lived experience of patients with breast cancer using decisional support aids during the prediagnosis, diagnosis, and treatment phases of their disease. Decisional support aids were defined as educational programs and literature (e.g., written resources, audio and video materials, the Internet), individual counseling, informed and unbiased (i.e., not promoting or valuing one treatment modality over another) physicians and nurses, multidisciplinary healthcare teams, and patient and family involvement in the decision-making process. A descriptive, phenomenologic approach (Colaizzi, 1978) was used for this study. This research method draws on participants’ accounts to discover the lived experience and the meanings and essential structure of that experience.

Background

Research pertaining to decision making and patient participation in medical treatment evolved out of the discipline...