Role and Gender Differences in Cancer-Related Distress: A Comparison of Survivor and Caregiver Self-Reports

B. Alex Matthews, PhD

Purpose/Objectives: To examine role and gender differences on measures of psychological distress as a consequence of dealing with cancer.

Methods: Dyads (i.e., survivors and family caregivers) completed matched questionnaires requesting demographic and medical information and measures of cancer-related distress.

Main Research Variables: Role (i.e., survivor or caregiver), gender, and psychological distress.

Findings: Caregiver means on overall psychological distress were significantly higher than those shown for survivors. Caregiver scores were significantly higher on distress for diagnosis and fear of cancer recurrence. Females scored higher than male caregivers on cancer-related anxiety, future uncertainties, fear of recurrence, and future diagnostic tests. Gender differences were not found for survivor distress.

Conclusions: Results suggest a need for gender-specific, dyad-tailored cancer support services.

Implications for Nursing: As expert caregivers, nurses can provide valuable assistance with the caregiving process that may decrease distress during the family’s cancer experience and adaptation period.

A diagnosis of cancer is a psychological blow that can produce cognitive and emotional crises and persistent distress to survivors (Akechi, Okamura, Nishiwaki, & Uchitomi, 2001; Baum & Poslusny, 2001; Manne, Glassman, & DuHamel, 2001; Zabora, Brintzenhofeszoc, Curbow, Hooker, & Piantadosi, 2001). However, cancer and how it is experienced are not limited to individual survivors; family caregivers also are affected (Fang & Manne, 2001; Ferrell, Grant, Borneman, Juarez, & terVeer, 1999; Matthews, Baker, & Spillers, 2003; Northouse, Templin, Mood, & Oberst, 1998). Because family caregivers often are key in providing support to cancer survivors (Fang & Manne), defining caregivers’ reactions in the context of those of survivors’ and elucidating the particular circumstances associated with major stress have important implications for survivors’ and their family’s well-being (Cassileth et al., 1985). The purpose of the current study was to examine role and gender differences on measures of psychological distress as a consequence of dealing with a cancer experience.

Measures of psychological distress among informal caregivers generally are equal or surpass those of the family members for whom care is provided (Blanchard, Albrecht, & Ruckdeschel, 1997; Fang & Manne, 2001; Given et al., 1993; Kornblith, Herr, Ofman, Sher, & Holland, 1994). Overall, the results of most investigations have shown that patients’ and their matched relatives’ psychosocial status often are correlated highly (Baider & De-Nour, 1988; Cassileth et al., 1985; Epping-Jordan et al., 1999; Kurtz, Kurtz, Given, & Given, 1996); however, the effect of role based on gender has received little attention in the literature (Northouse et al., 1998).

The majority of the research on caregiving focuses on Alzheimer’s disease. Relatively few studies have focused on cancer caregiving, but of those that have, the bulk of the research suggests that women generally report more distress than men (Baider, Koch, Esacson, & De-Nour, 1998; Hagedoorn, Buunk, Kuijer, Wobbes, & Sanderman, 2000; Lutzky & Knight, 1994; Morse & Fife, 1998). For example, in the few studies comparing the psychological distress of patients

B. Alex Matthews, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Center for Patient Care and Outcomes Research at the Medical College of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. At the time this article was prepared, Matthews was the director of family and community studies for the Behavioral Research Center in the national home office of the American Cancer Society in Atlanta, GA. (Submitted May 2002. Accepted for publication August 1, 2002.)