Symptoms, Self-Care, and Quality of Life of Chinese American Patients With Cancer

Fang-yu Chou, RN, PhD, Marylin Dodd, RN, PhD, FAAN, Donald Abrams, MD, and Geraldine Padilla, PhD

Purpose/Objectives: To explore the cancer symptom experience, self-care strategies, and quality of life (QOL) among Chinese Americans during outpatient chemotherapy.

Design: Descriptive, exploratory cohort study.

Setting: An outpatient infusion unit at a public urban county medical center.

Sample: 25 Chinese-speaking patients with cancer completed the study. Participants were first-generation immigrants with low levels of acculturation: 88% could not read English; 64% had an annual household income of less than $20,000.

Methods: Participants completed a basic demographics data sheet, the Suinn-Lew Acculturation Scale, the Memorial Symptom Assessment Scale and Self-Care Diary weekly for three weeks, and the Multidimensional QOL Scale–Cancer and Short-Form 36 Health Survey at the start and end of one chemotherapy cycle. Study instruments were translated into Chinese.

Main Research Variables: Symptoms, self-care, QOL, and acculturation.

Findings: Participants reported experiencing about 14 symptoms weekly. Lack of energy, hair loss, dry mouth, sleep difficulty, and loss of appetite were reported most frequently. On average, about two self-care strategies per symptom were reported and were low to moderate in effectiveness. About 20% of the sample listed Chinese medicine as part of their self-care strategies. A moderate level of QOL was reported.

Conclusions: Using translated standardized questionnaires can be a feasible method of data collection in studies with non–English-speaking patients. However, having well-trained, bilingual data collectors is important. More attention to long-term cancer self-management in minority patients with cancer is needed.

Implications for Nursing: Further research is needed with larger samples, more efficient community-based recruitment strategies, and the development and testing of culturally sensitive interventions.

Key Points . . .

➤ Although multiple symptoms are reported, few effective self-care strategies are used by Chinese American patients with cancer.
➤ Self-care activities can be culturally specific.
➤ Strategies to provide culturally appropriate education may improve cancer self-care in minority patients who do not speak English.

Symptom Management and Self-Care

As with chronic illnesses, cancer and its treatments can adversely affect patients’ quality of life (QOL). Cancer is a chronic disease that significantly affects a person’s physiologic, psychological, and social well-being. The symptoms and side effects from cancer and its treatments, such as chemotherapy, affect every aspect of QOL of patients with cancer (Dodd, Dibble, et al., 2001; Padilla & Grant, 1985). Current literature recent immigrants who are not yet proficient in English often do not participate in research and surveys (Ren & Chang, 1998). The absence of information on treatment morbidity, self-care practices, and experiences of symptom management could hinder healthcare providers in understanding healthcare needs among Chinese Americans during cancer treatment (Ren, Amick, Zhou, & Gandek, 1998). Patients who have particular cultural backgrounds may seek different types of self-management strategies; encounter bias and barriers in healthcare; have different expectations for cancer management as a result of cultural, social, and linguistic factors and established beliefs; and experience lack of knowledge or personal support (Kagawa-Singer, Wellisch, & Durvasula, 1997).

Fang-yu Chou, RN, PhD, is an assistant professor in the School of Nursing at San Francisco State University in California; and Marylin Dodd, RN, PhD, FAAN, is a professor in the School of Nursing, Donald Abrams, MD, is a professor in the School of Medicine, and Geraldine Padilla, PhD, is a professor in the School of Nursing, all at the University of California, San Francisco. Funding for this study was provided by a Minority Researcher and Mentorship Symptom Assessment and Management Grant supported by the ONS Foundation and Ortho Biotech. (Submitted September 2006. Accepted for publication December 19, 2006.)

Digital Object Identifier: 10.1188/07.ONF.1162-1167

ONCOLOGY NURSING FORUM – VOL 34, NO 6, 2007
1162