Help Seeking for Cancer Symptoms: A Review of the Literature

Mairin O’Mahony, BNS, MSc, RGN, RM, RNT, and Josephine Hegarty, PhD, MSc, BSc, RGN

Although much progress has been made in reducing mortality rates and improving survival, cancer still accounts for more deaths than heart disease in people younger than 85 years in the United States (Jemal et al., 2008). At the Sixth International Cancer Conference held in Ireland in 2008, Scott Lipman, MD, reported that a great challenge of cancer research is to detect cancer at an early stage (Healy, 2008). Early detection can improve patient outcomes in terms of survival rates and more effective treatments (American Cancer Society, 2000; Campo, Comber, & Gavin, 2004). For self-discovered cancer symptoms, early detection depends on patients promptly seeking help from a healthcare professional. However, evidence shows that many people delay help seeking for self-discovered cancer symptoms (Bish, Ramirez, Burgess, & Hunter, 2005; Cockburn, Paul, Tzelepis, McElduff, & Byles, 2003; Corner, Hopkinson, & Roffe, 2006; Facione & Giancarlo, 1998; Howell, Smith, & Roman, 2008; Mason & Strauss, 2004a; Meechan, Collins, & Petrie, 2002; Ristvedt & Trinkhaus, 2005; Scott, Grunfeld, Main, & McGurk, 2006). Help seeking is a ubiquitous term used in many different contexts. Help seeking, help-seeking, and seeking help are used interchangeably throughout the literature and often are discussed in the context of health-seeking behavior. This article aims to delineate how help seeking and related concepts are used in the literature and define help seeking in the context of cancer symptom discovery. In addition, theoretical literature that assists in understanding the concept of help seeking will be explored.

Literature Search

A literature search was conducted with CINAHL®, EBSCO, and PubMed databases. The search was limited to articles published in English from 1998–2008 to focus on the review and retrieve the most current literature (apart from seminal work by Facione, 1993; Facione & Dodd, 1995; Facione & Giancarlo, 1998; Facione, Giancarlo, & Chan, 2000; Facione, Miaskowski, Dodd, & Paul, 2002). Inclusion criteria were articles with cancer and at least one of the following key words in the titles or abstract: help seeking, help seeking, help-seeking, and help-seeking behavior. When pertinent, articles on help seeking related to other diseases or conditions were reviewed to further clarify the term. In total, 50 relevant articles were retrieved from the databases; additional articles were located using the reference lists of the literature reviewed. The review sought to determine how authors conceptually, operationally, and theoretically defined help seeking and identify factors that influence the help-seeking behavior of patients with self-discovered cancer symptoms. Thematic analysis of the literature revealed two key themes: “help seeking...