Perceptions of Support Among Older African American Cancer Survivors

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Patients diagnosed with cancer are living longer. An estimated 11 million cancer survivors are alive in the United States today, and the five-year survival rate for some cancers is as high as 90% (American Cancer Society [ACS], 2010). Cancer survival rates for African Americans also are improving. Since the 1960s, the overall five-year survival rate for African Americans has more than doubled, from 27% to 58% (ACS, 2010). Although these figures show that survival disparities are diminishing, African Americans continue to suffer disproportionately from cancer as they continue to have more advanced disease (ACS, 2010), less access to timely treatments and quality care (Shavers & Brown, 2002), and more comorbidities (Bryant & Cerfolio, 2008). This cancer burden is compounded by a social environment in which social stigma and fatalistic attitudes toward cancer are prevalent (Phillips, Cohen, & Moses, 1999; Powe & Finnie, 2003) and in which healthcare institutions discriminate against the poor and minorities (Burgess, Ding, Hargreaves, van Ryn, & Phelan, 2008; Hausmann, Jeong, Bost, & Ibrahim, 2008). When a diagnosis of cancer is confirmed, African Americans experience a myriad of supportive and unsupportive responses from family and friends (Grange, Matsuyama, Ingram, Lyckholm, & Smith, 2008). These responses are critical because they may affect whether survivors are adherent to recommended treatment and affect their overall quality of life during the cancer experience. However, researchers have not fully explored older African American cancer survivors’ perceptions of their social support and the implications of these needs on their survivorship experiences.

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