Although patients with cancer frequently experience forms of distress, including depression and anxiety, these issues often are under-recognized by healthcare providers. How providers respond to patient distress influences patients’ disclosures of concerns. Additional assessment by providers often is needed to identify treatable issues (e.g., educational needs, symptoms of depression) in patients. Providers may use distancing behaviors to decrease patient expressions of emotional concerns, perhaps because of a lack of confidence in handling socioemotional concerns or because of more practical factors (e.g., lack of time). Both acknowledgment and exploration of patient concerns by providers are necessary to adequately assess socioemotional concerns. These provider behaviors may be therapeutic interventions in themselves or may be useful in determining the need for referral and pharmacologic treatment.

This study was a secondary analysis of a subset from a preexisting data set of audio files collected in conjunction with an electronic self-report assessment–cancer (ESRA-C) tool used by patients with cancer to report symptoms and quality-of-life concerns. This data set was collected from 2005–2007 during ambulatory, on-treatment oncology clinic visits. Results revealed that such concerns are addressed significantly more often when providers receive a summary report of the ESRA-C tool prior to the actual visit (Berry et al., 2008). The term “providers” refers to oncology nurses, advanced practice nurses, physician assistants, and oncologists.

The purpose of the current analysis was to identify patient cues of socioemotional concerns and distress, explore provider cue-responding behaviors to patient cues of distress and socioemotional concerns, and examine the effect of an ESRA-C report on provider cue-responding behaviors.

Review of the Literature

Specific provider behaviors are known to influence patient outcomes (i.e., well-being, adjustment, and quality of life). Distancing behaviors by providers may indicate a lack of knowledge, time limitations, or a lack of confidence. The use of a summary report of patient concerns may have enhanced provider responsiveness, in general. Distancing behaviors by providers in response to patient verbal cues may indicate a lack of knowledge, time limitations, or a lack of confidence.