Breast Cancer Survivors’ Unmet Needs After Completion of Radiation Therapy Treatment

Michelle Pembroke, PhD, RN, OCN®, Julie Bradley, MD, and Lynne S. Nemeth, PhD, RN, FAAN

Approximately 16.9 million people in the United States are considered cancer survivors, of whom about 67% have lived five years or more after initial diagnosis and 18% have lived 20 years or longer (American Cancer Society [ACS], 2020). The number of cancer survivors treated with radiation therapy is expected to reach 3.38 million in 2020 (Bryant et al., 2017). Breast cancer is among the most frequently diagnosed cancers in the United States. An estimated 320,000 individuals will be diagnosed in 2020, and approximately 40% will receive radiation therapy treatment (ACS, 2020; Bryant et al., 2017). The Institute of Medicine (IOM) report From Cancer Patient to Cancer Survivor: Lost in Transition identified the failure of the U.S. healthcare system to manage cancer survivors’ needs beyond five years (Hewitt et al., 2005). The report recommends that healthcare workers provide continuous, lifelong care for cancer survivors, as well as anticipate survivors’ needs (Hewitt et al., 2005). As cancer is more commonly being recognized as a chronic disease, as opposed to an acute diagnosis, continuity of care is vital to long-term surveillance of treatment-related side effects and early detection of secondary malignancies (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018).

Cancer Survivorship

The definition of a cancer survivor has evolved since the IOM report and is now defined as an individual from the time of cancer diagnosis throughout the balance of his or her life, including family members caring for the individual (Nekhlyudov et al., 2017). One way to address providing continuity of care for patients along the cancer trajectory was the recommendation from the IOM to develop a survivorship care plan (SCP) to facilitate evidence-based surveillance guidelines and assessment tools for the management of treatment-related side effects (Hewitt et al., 2005). However, SCPs may not sufficiently address the