The Ecology of Patients’ Sexual Health Adjustment After Prostate Cancer Treatment: The Influence of the Social and Healthcare Environment

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PURPOSE: Little empirical research identifies environmental influences on sexual recovery of men with prostate cancer. This secondary qualitative analysis aimed to describe the role of the patients’ environment on their sexual recovery process following prostate cancer surgery.

PARTICIPANTS & SETTING: Transcripts of interviews with 8 heterosexual men were randomly selected and analyzed from a sample of 18 at three months postprostatectomy.

METHODOLOGIC APPROACH: The study was based on the social ecological model. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was applied to examine environmental factors affecting sexual recovery through the participant’s perspective.

FINDINGS: The value of trusted connections and support extended beyond the partner to the patient’s social and healthcare networks.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING: These findings support the need for providers to assess the full constellation of patients’ environmental experiences to better understand sexual recovery.

KEYWORDS phenomenology; prostatectomy; sexual recovery; sexual health; prostate cancer

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Men who undergo radical prostatectomy for prostate cancer frequently experience sexual problems following completion of surgical treatment. These sexuality changes are broadly categorized into physiologic, psychologic, and social dimensions, and all are negatively affected by prostate cancer treatment (Albaugh et al., 2017). Physiologic changes in men with prostate cancer include impotence and orgasmic disorder, which are broadly understood as sexual dysfunction (Wassersug et al., 2017). Psychosocially, survivors navigate emotional and relationship distress, and face stigmatization and social isolation when faced with discussing sexual dysfunction with others, including their partner (Ettridge et al., 2018; Hammond & Montgomery, 2018).

The diversity and prevalence of sexuality issues in men postprostatectomy have led to a growing body of research surrounding the sexual recovery process. Early research focused on the restoration of erectile ability through pro-erectile medications and aids (Matthew et al., 2005). However, although treatments for erectile dysfunction via sexual aids and medications can improve the physical component of sexual loss, these treatments often do not completely improve patients’ sex lives. Long-term use of sexual aids frequently declines because of unaddressed psychosocial barriers (Walker et al., 2014). Long-term quality-of-life, satisfaction, and psychosocial adjustment outcomes in men after prostate cancer are negatively affected by inadequate sexual recovery (Chambers et al., 2017). Some potential preoperative barriers to sexual recovery include developmental sexual losses, underdeveloped sexual coping skills, and stress (Wittmann, Carolan, et al., 2015).