Understanding Men’s Experiences With Prostate Cancer Stigma: A Qualitative Study

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Prostate cancer is the most common cancer among men in Canada, with about 21,000 new cases diagnosed annually (Canadian Cancer Statistics Advisory Committee [CCSAC], 2018). Because of modern medical advances, most men survive prostate cancer but face long-lasting and late-appearing side effects (CCSAC, 2018; Ettridge et al., 2019; Weber & Sherwill-Navarro, 2005), which can be physical (e.g., fatigue, sexual dysfunction, incontinence) or psychological (e.g., stress, anxiety, depression) (Weber & Sherwill-Navarro, 2005). In addition to the negative side effects, an increasing number of prostate cancer survivors are facing a new kind of challenge—stigma.

Stigma, which refers to a human attribute that is devalued in society (Goffman, 1963), is not new to cancer. In general, cancer has been identified as a highly stigmatized condition, often because of its association with death, changes in one’s body image, or blame and shame (Else-Quest et al., 2009; Mosher & Danoff-Berg, 2007). Evidence has shown that prostate cancer survivors can experience adverse consequences, such as depression and anxiety, making cancer-related stigma a growing topic in prostate cancer–related research (Koller et al., 1996). To this point, most cancer stigma research has focused on lung cancer, because there are strong feelings of blame and shame caused by the belief that one has caused his or her own disease (Else-Quest et al., 2009; Mosher & Danoff-Berg, 2007). Evidence has shown that prostate cancer survivors can experience adverse consequences, such as depression and anxiety, making cancer-related stigma a growing topic in prostate cancer–related research (Koller et al., 1996).

To date, research on prostate cancer stigma has identified that perceptions of the disease as self-inflicted can lead to internalized stigma (Else-Quest et al., 2009; Lebel & Devins, 2008; Vogel et al., 2011). Internalized stigma, characterized by negative self-perceptions and self-blame, has been shown to...