Breast Cancer Education for the Deaf Community in American Sign Language

Sean Hickey, MD, Erin L. Merz, MA, Vanessa L. Malcarne, PhD, Darlene Clark Gunsauls, MS, Jessica Huang, PharmD, and Georgia Robins Sadler, BSN, MBA, PhD

The Deaf community (DC) is a subset of the 36–37 million Americans with some degree of hearing loss (Lucas, Schiller, & Benson, 2004; Pleis & Lethbridge-Cejku, 2007). American Sign Language (ASL) is the primary medium of communication for the DC subset (Padden & Humphries, 1990). The exact size of the DC is unknown because federal and state surveys do not list ASL as a language option; however, the DC is estimated to be about 550,000–1,000,000 adults in the United States and Canada (Mitchell, Young, Bachleda, & Karchmer, 2006).

Members of the DC are often “early-deafened,” and develop extensive hearing loss prior to acquiring English fluency (Barnett, 2002); therefore, if English is learned at all, often it will be a second language without the benefit of aural reinforcement. Consequently, the average reading level of the DC is between third and fifth grades (Gallaudet Research Institute, 1996; Holt, Traxler, & Allen, 1997; Singleton, Morgan, DiGello, Wiles, & Rivers, 2004).

Considerable evidence suggests that language and culture barriers qualify the DC as a medically underserved population (Iezzoni, O’Day, Killeen, & Harker, 2004; Steinberg, Barnett, Meador, Wiggins, & Zazove, 2006) and contribute to their poorer health status (Cooper & Powe, 2004). Individuals who are Deaf commonly report difficulties in accessing health care as well as frustrations with doctor-patient communication when health care is received (Barnett & Franks, 2002). Of all the identified disability subgroups in the United States, the DC reports the highest dissatisfaction with access to and quality of health care (Iezzoni, Davis, Soukup, & O’Day, 2002).

Breast cancer is the most common, as well as the second leading cause of cancer death in women (American Cancer Society [ACS], 2009). Regular screenings detect breast cancer at earlier stages, decreasing morbidity and mortality. A review of the literature disclosed few studies related to women who are Deaf accessing breast cancer information, screening, and treatment (Orsi, Margellos-