

Sexual Health Education

Knowledge level of oncology nurses and barriers to discussing concerns with patients

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BACKGROUND: Cancer treatment has a significant impact on a patient's sexual health and function. However, numerous communication barriers deter healthcare professionals from initiating a sexual health conversation with patients.

OBJECTIVES: This study assessed the effects of a nurse-focused sexual health education workshop on change in knowledge of sexual concerns, barriers to discussing sexuality, and frequency of bringing up sexual concerns.

METHODS: A train-the-trainer approach was used to educate oncology nurse managers, who then trained oncology nurses (N = 65) at 10 education workshops. Each workshop provided four hours of content on sexual health and incorporated role-play and lecture.

FINDINGS: Mean knowledge scores were improved, and barriers to discussing sexuality at the three- and six-month follow-ups were reduced. Frequency in discussing sexual concerns increased at three months and was sustained at six months.

KEYWORDS

sexual health; sexuality; communication; barriers; education; skills training

DIGITAL OBJECT IDENTIFIER

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RECEIVING A CANCER DIAGNOSIS AFFECTS THE WELL-BEING of patients in terms of their physical, emotional, and social health. Although cancer treatment can be lifesaving, its effects often create challenges related to the ability of patients to perform daily activities of living, including promoting intimate relationships (Hordern et al., 2009). Sexual health concerns are complex, and all physiologic, physical, psychological, and cultural aspects must be considered to improve the quality of life of patients with cancer (Higano et al., 2016). Sexual dysfunction has been reported in about 40%–100% of women and men who have been treated for cancer (Zhou et al., 2015); however, only 59% of women have reported an absence or decrease in sexual function compared to 79% of men (Hawkins et al., 2009). Although women with gynecologic cancer desired informational services through written materials or a one-on-one consultation with a provider (McCallum et al., 2014), sexual health needs often remain overlooked, forgotten, or unprioritized (McCallum et al., 2012). In a study by Maree and Fitch (2019), conversations about sexual health occurred most often only as part of the consenting process for procedures or if the patient asked a question. This is despite the existence of published guidelines from the American Society of Clinical Oncology that promote effective management of symptoms related to cancer, its treatment, and side effects (Carter et al., 2018).

Background

Nurses experience challenges in discussing sexual health with patients with cancer. Such challenges can include limited knowledge, poor communication skills, and scarce training available to improve confidence (Depke & Onitilo, 2015; Wang et al., 2015). In addition, embarrassment and lack of time (Vermeer et al., 2015) or stigma and shyness may come into play (McCallum et al., 2014). The age of the patient and the nurse has also been reported as a barrier to communication about sexual health (Moore et al., 2013).

Research on evidence-based studies that address clinician training to improve communication and patient education regarding sexual health remains limited. In a study of 71 oncology clinicians, Wang et al. (2015) reported that, although the overwhelming majority of providers were