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Psychosocial support: Meeting the standard for quality patient care

Helen H. Miller, LCSW, ACSW

In my three decades practicing clinical and executive management in social service settings, I have witnessed many breakthroughs in cancer treatment leading to better prognoses for people with cancer. However, oncology social workers continue to report that clients feel their health care team has not adequately addressed their emotional and practical concerns.

Viewing the elimination of cancer cells as the singular goal of treatment is not providing comprehensive care. To provide the most effective patient care, the best practice is to address not only medical and nursing issues, but also psychosocial interventions for every patient and their loved ones.

The landmark Institute of Medicine (IOM) report *Cancer Care for the Whole Patient: Meeting Psychosocial Health Needs* found attention to psychosocial needs to be the exception rather than the rule. Seven years after the report was published, despite overwhelming evidence that support services help relieve emotional stress and lead to better patient outcomes, too many providers undervalue psychosocial care.

Apart from medical challenges, patients and their loved ones must cope with myriad concerns. Some common concerns that impact treatment adherence include feelings of depression and anxiety, barriers to care (such as difficulty coordinating transportation or child care), financial uncertainty, a lack of information about diagnosis and

treatment, and difficulty balancing work/school/family responsibilities.

People coping with cancer often share with CancerCare oncology social workers that they feel rushed at their appointments or do not want to bother their health care team with nonmedical concerns. While factors such as personnel shortages, an increased number of cases, and established clinical practice procedures may certainly impact the amount of time spent with each patient, they should not do so at the expense of adequate doctor/patient communication.

The health care professional is not the only one who may underestimate the importance of psychosocial care. CancerCare client Ekata, a young New Yorker coping with chronic lymphocytic leukemia, recalls the skepticism she felt after her health care team and brother recommended seeking individual counseling services. Ekata felt she was doing well managing her feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, but was having difficulty communicating with her family.

"My family looks to me for cues on how to act, so I was concerned about making them worry about me," Ekata says. "There are certain things I can't open up about [with them]." She put on a brave front for the sake of her family, but continued wrestling with private anxieties. To assuage her brother, Ekata called CancerCare and was

immediately put in touch with an oncology social worker.

Ekata admittedly had low expectations about what she might gain from psychosocial support. “I thought I would have two or three sessions, and that would be it,” she says. Ekata found speaking with her social worker to be so beneficial, however, she continued coming to *CancerCare* for monthly counseling sessions.

“When I come to *CancerCare*,” Ekata says, “that is my safe place to talk about anything. My social worker has been an amazing validation for me. It’s hard to figure out your emotions sometimes, but she makes me realize that it’s okay to feel the way I feel.”

Along with receiving individual counseling, many patients and caregivers benefit from participating in a support group. Organizations such as *CancerCare* (www.cancercare.org) offer free support groups for patients and caregivers. *CancerCare* also refers patients and loved ones to resources in their community that can provide additional emotional and practical support.

The American Cancer Society (www.cancer.org) and *Cancer.Net* (www.cancer.net)

provide excellent, patient-friendly information on a wide variety of cancer-related topics, including doctor/patient communication. The American Cancer Society staff can also direct callers to practical support services such as its Road to Recovery transportation assistance program.

Many patients and caregivers report feeling particularly stressed regarding financial and insurance concerns. Many local and national organizations offer direct financial assistance for treatment-related expenses such as lodging, transportation, child care, and over-the-counter medications. The Cancer Financial Assistance Coalition Web site, www.cancerfac.org, includes a searchable database of regional and national organizations that offer financial help. Other organizations such as the *CancerCare* Co-Payment Assistance Foundation (www.cancercarecopay.org) help eligible people afford copayments for chemotherapy and targeted treatment drugs.

People coping with a cancer diagnosis face what can feel like insurmountable challenges. Meeting patients’ and caregivers’ psychosocial needs will not only help them better manage difficult feelings; it will also yield better adherence and treatment outcomes. ■

Helen Miller is CEO of *CancerCare*.



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