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REVIEW

Literature review: An exploration of the role of the Australian breast care nurse in the provision of information and supportive care



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Summary Breast care nurses (BCNs) were introduced to the Australian health care system in the 1990s to facilitate better continuity of care and increase psychosocial support to women with breast cancer. Yet women with breast cancer, particularly those in rural and remote Australia have high levels of unmet supportive needs. The purpose of this literature review was to examine the role of the Australian breast care nurse in the provision of information and support to women with breast cancer.

A literature review was conducted using a number of databases from January 2006 to November 2012. Pre-set criteria were used, and nine research papers were identified; one randomised control trial, five quantitative studies, two qualitative studies and one mixed method study. Of the nine studies identified, only one attempted to explore the national perspective, however participants from Tasmania were not used.

Overall, the review revealed very few published Australian studies evaluating the role of the BCN since 2006. The results demonstrate a need for larger studies conducted on a national scale, using participants from diverse geographical areas to gain more insight into the level of access to BCN care experienced by Australian women from both urban and rural and remote areas. It is recommended that further research be undertaken in order to build up a body of quantitative data about the role of the Australian BCN in providing information and support to women.

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Introduction

Cancer is a major cause of death in Australia (AIHW, 2012a). Approximately one-third of people affected by cancer live in rural, regional or remote areas (Clinical Oncological Society of Australia & Medical Oncology Group of Australia, 2010). A number of studies have revealed that people with cancer in these areas have poorer survival rates than those living in major metropolitan centres (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2010, 2012a; Cancer Council Queensland (CCQ), 2009; National Rural Health Alliance Inc., 2009; Phillips, 2009; Underhill, Goldstein, & Grogan, 2006). The further from a metropolitan centre patients with cancer live, the more likely they are to die within five years of diagnosis (CCQ, 2009). Therefore, there is still more work to be done to assist the many people who are diagnosed with cancer, especially those living in rural or remote areas.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer among Australian women with 12,567 cases diagnosed in 2007 (AIHW, 2012b). By 2015, the number of new breast cancer cases among women is projected to be 22% higher than in 2006, with the numbers of women diagnosed with breast cancer estimated to be around 15,409 (AIHW, 2012a). Despite the growing numbers of women being diagnosed with cancer, there has been an increase in relative survival after diagnosis of breast cancer from 72.6% in the five years 1982–1987 to 88.3% in the five years 2000–2006 (Cancer Australia, 2012). In 2006, it was estimated that there were 143,967 breast cancer survivors who had been diagnosed in the previous 25 years (Cancer Australia, 2012).

With the growing numbers of breast cancer survivors, there is a high need for accessible and quality post-treatment medical and psychosocial care (Lawler, Spathonis, Masters, Adams, & Eakin, 2011). There is evidence that many women do not have adequate information about their disease and treatment, nor receive enough practical and emotional support from health professionals (Aranda et al., 2006; Davis et al., 2004; Girgis, Boynes, Sanson-Fisher, & Burrows, 2000; Lawler et al., 2011; McGrath et al., 1999; Raupach & Hiller, 2002). Addressing these needs for rural women can prove even more difficult with rural health service provision challenged by issues of equity, coverage and supply (National Breast Cancer Centre (NBCC), 2001).

In Australia in the 1990s, breast care nurses (BCNs) were formally introduced to the Australian health care system to facilitate better continuity of care and psychosocial support (Jones, Leach, Chambers, & Occhipinti, 2010). The

consensus is that BCNs are valued highly by their patients (Eicher, Marquard, & Aebi, 2006; Halkett, Arbon, Scutter, & Borg, 2006; Jones et al., 2010; Reed, Scanlon, & Fenton, 2010), however, there has been little contemporary research conducted to investigate and report the role of the Australian BCN (Halkett et al., 2006; Jones et al., 2010). The following review identified Australian research papers where breast care nurses and the provision of information and support were a component of research and discussion

Aim

To conduct a review of the literature examining the Australian breast care nurse role in supporting women with breast cancer. The research questions the literature review aims to answer include:

1. What is the role of the Australian breast care nurse as reported in the current literature?
2. What evidence is there to report on the role of the Australian breast care nurse and what are the gaps in the literature?

Methodology

A number of databases including CINAHL, Medline, The Cochrane Library, and Academic Search Complete were searched. Two major searches were conducted to extract specific information for this literature review. First, a search was completed where the main search term used was 'breast cancer', combined with the term 'breast care nurse'. Papers were limited to those published from 2006 to 2012 since papers published earlier than 2006 had been reviewed in a Cochrane Review (Cruickshank, Kennedy, Lockhart, Dosser, & Dallas, 2008) and a systematic review (Eicher et al., 2006). Other limiters were added to extract only research papers written in the English language, with a geographical subset of Australia and New Zealand, simply to examine only research relating to the Australian context. This search revealed 71 articles. To check for any other relevant papers, the main search term 'breast care nurse' was combined with terms such as 'supportive care', 'psychosocial care' and 'follow up care'. This search did not reveal any further relevant papers. The abstracts of 71 papers were read and papers not meeting the selection criteria were excluded, leaving a total of 9 papers to review. Reference lists of key articles

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