A Mentored Cooperative Group Pilot Study: Atrophic Vaginitis

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Objectives: *To review nursing research initiatives from two cooperative groups and outline a pilot study performed by a junior nurse researcher mentored by cooperative group nurse researchers and institutional physicians.*

Data Sources: *PubMed, Cochrane Library, Scopus, World Wide Web.*

Conclusion: *Nursing research can be initiated and led by nurses in the cooperative group setting. The team approach model of research includes several disciplines to examine multiple facets of the same problem, or of multiple problems that a cancer patient may face. This new model will enable a greater number of nurse researchers to investigate symptom management, survivorship, and quality-of-life issues.*

Implications for Nursing Practice: *Nurse researchers should be included in every cooperative group study to investigate nurse-sensitive outcomes and issues related to symptom management, survivorship, and quality of life.*

Key Words: *Atrophic vaginitis, vaginal dryness, dyspareunia, mentor, mentorship, cooperative group, pilot study*

THE cancer cooperative groups have changed from 10 separate groups to four complementary groups following the 2010 Institute of Medicine report.[1] The legacy groups of Cancer and Leukemia Group B (CALGB), North Central Cancer Treatment Group (NCCTG), and the American College of Surgeons Oncology Group (ACOSOG) have merged into the Alliance for Clinical Trials in Oncology Network (Alliance).[2] NCCTG and CALGB oncology nursing

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committees (ONC) had a cohort of junior and senior nurse scientists[3,4] with a history of robust studies that have contributed to the science with innovations in oncology symptom management. These nursing cooperative group studies have flourished because of strong mentorship from nurse scientists and physician colleagues at the cooperative group and institutional levels. An example of this mentorship is a pilot study that originated in the CALGB legacy ONC: "The effect of omega 3 fatty acids on atrophic vaginitis in breast cancer survivors."

History of NCCTG Nursing Research

The NCCTG[5] has supported nurse researcher-initiated pilot and collaborative studies for nearly two decades, with a focus on symptom management of adult cancer-related symptoms. Nurse researchers have been principal investigators on symptom management studies about menopausal symptoms, fatigue, and cognitive dysfunction in breast,[6-11] which have significantly furthered the science of cancer survivorship care. Nurse researchers have also been co-investigators on a number of physician-led research studies with measurement of nursing outcome measures. The merger of NCCTG into the Alliance has significantly strengthened and positioned Alliance nursing research endeavors. Ongoing National Cancer Institute-supported studies continue in collaborative work[12] by senior nurse researchers in the Alliance symptom management committee. They seek to further the science on the measurement of symptoms related to peripheral neuropathy[12] and to compare non-pharmacologic interventions for the treatment of sleep-wake disturbances.[13]

History of CALGB Nursing Research

In 1993, the legacy CALGB ONC research members were successful in launching their first nurse-sponsored, funded study about weight loss. Other studies soon followed, such as expressive writing, lymphedema, hot flashes in men with prostate cancer, narcotic-induced constipation, and treatment of peripheral neuropathy.[2] Senior nurse researchers from the ONC have mentored junior nurse researchers in pilot studies such as atrophic vaginitis and colonoscopy screening education in breast cancer survivors. The study of duloxetine for the relief of peripheral neuropathy originated[2,3] within the CALGB ONC. The discovery of the symptomatic effectiveness of this agent prompted development of an Alliance cooperative group study to further study the disabling side effects of neurotoxic chemotherapy.[3,12]

Mentorship

Professional development for junior researchers is essential in the competitive and changing world of basic and translational science.[13] Academic institutions typically have the advantage of senior research faculty who can provide mentorship to support the development of studies and extramural research funding. These mentors advise about the importance of interdisciplinary research and components of effective management of resources including research staff.[14] Effective strategies include small groups with 1:1 or 1:2 mentor-to-mentee groups, office time with 1:1 discussions, related lectures, directed readings,[15] and ongoing interaction. Mentees must be willing to submit detailed proposals and budgets to receive feedback for improvement.[15]

Informal, unstructured discussion groups with peers provide a relaxed environment for creative interaction and feedback, as well as co-mentoring.[16] These discussion groups can foster personal and scientific growth with diverse group members in mutually respectful, non-hierarchical dialogue.[16] Group commitment to regularly scheduled meetings is essential to outcomes of new projects, submissions of abstracts to meetings, subsequent presentations, and dissemination to journals.[17] Mentorship is a powerful process that can affect the professional, intellectual, and personal development of the nurse scientist.[18]

The Mentor

Mentors can be challenged with their time, expertise, and energy, especially when they must combine a clinical practice with a program of research, as is common with physicians in the cooperative group setting. They are often writing grants, disseminating research findings, developing new ideas, and maintaining patient care.[19] Yet mentorship is a rewarding role and can reap its own remunerations for the mentor. Conversely, it can also hamper the researcher's own hectic schedule and limit their accomplishments, personal activities, or family time.[19] Mentorship of a junior scientist takes committed time and is reflective of the mentor's dedication to scientific inquiry.[20]

Competencies of mentors for clinical and translational research are important to enhance the mentor-to-mentee working relationship. A study