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Research Article

Providing Supportive Care for Young Breast Cancer Patients: Exploring the Comfort Level and Educational Needs of the Interprofessional Health Care Team at a Comprehensive Cancer Centre

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Younger patients diagnosed with breast cancer have unique issues compared with their older counterparts, including premature menopause, body image, and fertility/relationship concerns. However, breast cancer information tends to focus on older patients. The interprofessional team at a large hospital was surveyed to assess comfort level and knowledge of supportive care for the younger population.

Methods: A one-time, cross-sectional survey was distributed to oncologists, nurses, radiation therapists, and other supportive care professionals. The survey included multiple-choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questions asking participants to assess their knowledge and comfort level around the issues faced by younger breast cancer patients. Demographic information was collected, and results were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Results: In total, 67 questionnaires were returned (22% response rate); 92% of respondents felt comfortable providing care to young breast cancer patients, whereas 72% were confident in their ability to provide support for their psychosocial needs. However, most participants rated their knowledge of issues specific to these patients higher than their comfort level. Disparity between the professions occurred, with oncologists and nurses reporting a higher comfort level than other professions.

Conclusions: Although most professionals felt they had good knowledge of the issues faced by young breast cancer patients, many felt less confident addressing these issues with their patients. This informational needs gap presents an opportunity for the emergence of champions to heighten awareness and educate colleagues in the supportive care of this patient population.

RÉSUMÉ

But : Les patientes plus jeunes qui reçoivent un diagnostic de cancer du sein présentent des enjeux particuliers par rapport aux patientes plus âgées, incluant la ménopause prématurée et des préoccupations face à l'image corporelle, à la fertilité et aux relations personnelles. Cependant, l'information sur le cancer du sein tend à mettre l'accent sur les patientes plus âgées. Un sondage a été réalisé auprès de l'équipe interprofessionnelle d'un grand hôpital afin d'évaluer le niveau d'aisance et de connaissance des soins de soutien pour la population plus jeune.

Méthodologie : Un questionnaire d'enquête ponctuelle transversale a été distribué aux oncologues, aux infirmières, aux radiothérapeutes et autres professionnels des soins de soutien. Le sondage comportait des questions à choix multiple, des questions à échelle de Likert et des questions ouvertes demandant aux professionnels d'évaluer leur connaissance et leur degré d'aisance face aux enjeux auxquels sont confrontées les patientes plus jeunes ayant un cancer du sein. Des données démographiques ont aussi été recueillies et les résultats ont été analysés à l'aide de la statistique descriptive.

Résultats : Au total, 67 questionnaires ont été retournés (taux de réponse: 22 %); 92 % des répondants se sentent à l'aise d'offrir des soins aux jeunes patientes avec un cancer du sein, tandis que 72 % sont sûrs d'être en mesure de leur offrir un soutien pour leurs besoins psychosociaux. Cependant, la plupart des répondants ont coté leurs connaissances des enjeux spécifiques à cette population à un niveau plus élevé que leur degré d'aisance. Il y a des disparités entre les professions, les oncologues et les infirmières indiquant un niveau d'aisance plus élevé que les autres professionnels.

Conclusions : Bien que la plupart des professionnels estiment avoir une bonne connaissance des enjeux auxquels sont confrontées les jeunes patientes avec un cancer du sein, plusieurs se sentent moins à l'aise pour aborder ces questions avec leurs patientes. Cette lacune dans l'information fournir une occasion pour l'émergence de champions chargés de sensibiliser et d'éduquer leurs collègues en ce qui a trait aux soins de soutien pour cette population de patientes.

Keywords: breast cancer; education; interprofessional; supportive care; young

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Introduction

Breast cancer is the most common cancer and the second leading cause of cancer death among Canadian women [1]. However, breast cancer primarily affects older women. In 2014, 30% of Canadian women diagnosed with breast cancer were over the age of 69, and the majority (52%) were between the ages of 50 and 69 [1]. In contrast, only 18% of cases were diagnosed in women under 50 years of age [1]. However, the number of women in this younger age group being diagnosed with breast cancer has increased in recent years [2]. Younger women tend to be diagnosed with advanced disease, requiring a number of intensive treatments provided by an interprofessional team of oncologists, nurses, radiation therapists, and other supportive care professionals [3]. After successful treatment, 85% of these patients will live disease free for more than 5 years while continuing to have lifelong morbidity [3].

Younger breast cancer patients tend to have more diverse and unique issues around diagnosis and treatment compared with older patients [4]. These issues include, but are not limited to, premature menopause, early career disruptions, loss of fertility, impaired sexual function, and body image problems. Canada and Schover [5] surveyed women under 40 years of age diagnosed with cancer and found that cancer-related infertility was a cause of significant, long-term distress. Morrow et al [6] reported that young breast cancer patients experienced significant long-term effects on quality of life because of cancer or treatment-related sexual dysfunction. Rosenberg et al [7] highlighted the negative impact of cancer treatment on body image in a prospective study of 419 young breast cancer patients. In a study by Kinamore [8], two thirds of breast cancer patients were unhappy with their body image after treatment. Many of the patients reported these concerns were overlooked by their health care team because of insufficient training, lack of time, or discomfort dealing with the situation. This has the potential to create an environment in which patients find it difficult to ask for support [8]. Overall, younger breast cancer patients report a worse quality of life, more psychological issues, and higher levels of distress compared with their older counterparts [4].

Most information about breast cancer in women is specific to older age groups because of the higher number of breast cancer cases in older women [8]. Although it is fairly easy for a patient to obtain breast cancer information, many young patients have difficulty relating to information designed for their older peers [3]. Ali and Warner [3] reported that many young breast cancer patients' informational needs are not met, and health care professionals (HCPs) cannot provide assistance to these patients in a timely manner.

As cited earlier, breast cancer in young patients is still relatively rare, with only 18% of newly diagnosed patients in the under 50 age group [1]. However, the special needs of this population necessitate expertise in medical and psychological treatment that is not always available because of the lack of specially trained HCPs [3]. It is important that HCPs are able to identify young patients with unsatisfied needs at the earliest stage of their treatment to improve quality of life in their later years [9]. This cross-sectional survey study was performed to determine whether the interprofessional team of oncologists, nurses, radiation therapists, and other supportive care professionals at a large hospital-based cancer centre have the knowledge and comfort level to adequately meet the supportive care needs of young breast cancer patients.

Methods

Recruitment

The study was conducted as a one-time, cross-sectional survey of oncology HCPs at a large, hospital-based cancer centre in Canada. Before administering the survey, ethics approval for this study was obtained from the institutional research ethics board.

All oncology HCPs at the institution directly involved in the treatment and/or care of breast cancer patients were invited by e-mail to participate in the survey. Approximately 300 clinical staff members were invited to participate, including physicians, radiation therapists, nurses, and other supportive care professionals. Invitations contained information explaining that the survey was voluntary and anonymous and that completion of the survey would be indicative of consent. Only staff members providing direct treatment and/or care to breast cancer patients were requested to complete the survey.

Survey Design and Analysis

After a review of the literature, an initial draft of the survey was developed and piloted with a small, interprofessional group of six experts representing radiation oncology [2], nursing [1], radiation therapy [2], and occupational therapy [1]. Participants were encouraged to give feedback on all aspects of the survey, and revisions were made based on their comments.

The final survey consisted of a series of multiple-choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questions asking participants to self-assess their knowledge and comfort level around the unique supportive care issues experienced by younger breast cancer patients (Appendix 1). Space was provided for the participants to comment further and express their thoughts. Demographic questions regarding profession, age, sex, and clinical experience were also included. The survey required approximately 10 minutes to complete. The survey was available to the participants for 4 weeks after the initial e-mail invitation, and three reminder e-mails were given.

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and chi-square analysis where appropriate. Comments from participants were collated and examined for trends.

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