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Towards Reducing Cancer Burden: Patient Perspectives on the Role of Cancer Care Nurses

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Keywords: Role, cancer care nurse, experience, expectation

Abstract: To address the shortage of oncologists in Malaysia, cancer care nurses are required to play a major role in caring cancer patients. Little is known, however, about how patients of cancer care nurses perceive the nurses’ professionalism in carrying out their roles. A study was conducted to explore patients’ perspectives on the role and expectations of cancer care nurses in Malaysia. Thirteen cancer patients were interviewed using an open-ended question guide in Peninsular Malaysia. Six role elements were described and major experiences were highlighted.

Introduction

The rise in cancer incidence has spread to developing nations such as Malaysia, where a total of 21,773 cancer cases were diagnosed among Malaysians in Peninsular Malaysia in 2006 alone (Zainal A et al., 2006). Despite the high number of cancer cases, the country still suffers from a severe shortage of oncologists. Yep et al. (2006) cited the high oncologist-patient ratio of 1: 650,000 as evidence of this claim. With such a severe shortage of oncologists, other cancer specialists, such as nurses, must do more to meet the needs of the growing population of cancer patients in the country.

Despite the important role that nurses must play to provide care for cancer patients, little is known about their level of professionalism in carrying out their duties. Furthermore, few studies using an in-depth qualitative approach have explored this issue from the perspective of the patients, in an attempt to understand patients’ experiences with nurses. With the increasing importance of cancer care nurses as evidenced by the growing number of cancer patients and the ongoing shortage of oncologists, efforts are needed to enhance the professionalism of cancer care nurses to ensure the highest quality care is provided. The aim of this study, therefore, is to explore patients’ perspectives of the role and expectations of cancer care nurses in the Malaysian context. The study is guided by two research questions: (1) What are patient experiences with cancer care nurses; and (2) What are patient expectations on the role of cancer care nurses?

Leila et al. (2009) reported that nurses who are capable of providing good care can fulfill patients’ expectations, perceptions, and desires, all of which form important sources of knowledge that can guide nurses through their practice. Accessing the patient’s perspectives on competencies needed by cancer care nurses is important for planning their continuing professional education. Previous research related to the roles of cancer care nurses identified eleven role elements central to nurses in hospital settings including supporter, educator, specialist nurse, counselor, adviser, team member, resource person, caregiver, public advocate, manager and researcher (Kate & Wilkes, 1998).

Methodology

To answer the above mentioned research questions, a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews was used. Thirteen patients undergoing cancer treatment in four public hospitals were
purposively selected from four regions in Peninsular Malaysia. All informants completed a written consent form. A customized, open-ended question guide was developed by reviewing the relevant literature and feedback from three cancer survivors. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed concurrently with data collection. The constant comparative method was used to analyze the data.

**Findings & Discussion**

Patient experiences with cancer care nurses were described by the informants as ranging from positive to negative. Majority of the patients were happy with the nurses who treated them. On the other hand, the informants reported some challenges when they were mishandled by incompetent nurses. These nurses were often young and inexperienced. In responding to research question 2, the informants further described six roles that they expected the nurses to play: (1) motivator, (2) resource person, (3) educator, (4) caregiver, (5) advisor, and (6) counselor. Further, the informants expected the nurses to be specialists.

Most of the incompetence nurses are young and new in nursing field. Previous research (Leila et al., 2009) recommends training and continuous professional education to improve the nurses’ competence. Overall, the roles of cancer care nurses are similar to Kate & Wilkes (1998) research finding. By performing the six roles identify, suggest that the informants expect the cancer care nurses to be caring and supportive.

**Conclusion & Issues**

Two conclusions can be inferred from this study; (1) There was a mix of cancer patient responses on their experiences with cancer care nurses. Cancer patients expected more services given the unique experience and training of cancer care nurses, and (2) Patients expected cancer care nurses to play a more caring role.

Besides presenting the overview and results of the study, this roundtable discussion seeks to deliberate on issues encountered in implementing the study and its outcome. Three main challenges will be highlighted: (1) willingness of patients to be informants as cancer is still considered a taboo by many in this part of the world, (2) cultural barriers related to disclosing in-depth information about health care providers and services rendered; and (3) translating the findings into practice for the nurses’ continuous professional development.

**Reference**


