

CANCER CARE FOR THE WHOLE PATIENT: MEETING PSYCHOSOCIAL HEALTH NEEDS

For Health Care Providers

Modern cancer care is a showpiece of state-of-the-science biomedical treatment. Biomedical research aimed at improving diagnosis and treatment continues to point to ways to significantly increase the long term survival of most patients diagnosed with cancer. Over the past two decades, the five year survival rate for the 15 most common cancers has increased from 43 to 64 percent for men and from 57 to 64 percent for women.

Research findings from other fields of study also have identified ways of improving the quality of cancer care and the health of patients. A growing body of scientific evidence demonstrates that the psychological and social (“psychosocial”) problems created or exacerbated by cancer (e.g., depression, other emotional problems, or a lack of information or skills needed to manage illness) can be effectively addressed by a number of services and interventions. Other, less studied services such as transportation or financial assistance are clearly important to help support cancer patients and their families. Together, these services reduce patients’ suffering, help them adhere to prescribed treatments, and support their return to health.

THE PROBLEM

In spite of this evidence, patients, physicians and other cancer care providers tell us that attention to patients’ psychosocial health needs is the exception rather than the rule in cancer care today. Many people living with cancer report dissatisfaction with the amount and type of information they are given about their diagnosis, available treatments, and ways to manage their illness and health. Health care providers often fail to communicate this information in ways that are understandable to patients. Patients also report that their care providers do not understand their psychosocial needs; do not consider psychosocial support an integral part of their care; are unaware of psychosocial health care resources; and fail to recognize, adequately treat, or refer patients to services that could help.

A number of factors can get in the way of clinicians’ addressing psychosocial health needs. These include the way in which clinical practices are designed, the education and training of the health care workforce, shortages and maldistribution of health personnel, and the nature of the payment and policy environment in which health care is delivered. Because of this, improving the delivery of psychosocial health services requires a multi-pronged solution.



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