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THE ROLE OF PSYCHO-SOCIAL SUPPORT AMONG CANCER PATIENTS UNDERGOING THERAPY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

People worry about cancer for many different reasons. Some feel that they cannot afford the treatment of the disease. The greatest fear of cancer is the mortality associated with it. Cancer is not just one disease, but a generic term used to encompass a group of more than two hundred diseases sharing common characteristics. Self-efficacy is very important for cancer patients because it boosts the patient's confidence and adjustment. Again, social support plays an important role in protecting cancer patients from developing other problems like hypertension. On the other hand, Cancer patients in Nigeria face many psychological problems like anxiety, social isolation, and depression. Psycho-social dimension is important because it promotes the wellbeing of the cancer patient. Counselling and social support are important for cancer patients. Good counselling assists cancer patients to make informed decisions and cope better with their health. Social support eases loneliness. Consequently, this research aims at enlightening the common masses in Nigeria about the problem of cancer, what triggers the disease and best method to prevent it as well as to underline the importance of psycho-social supports in boosting the confidence and adjustment of cancer patients.

Keywords: role, cancer patients, anxiety, psycho-social support, counselling.

INTRODUCTION

In a typical tropical country like Nigeria, most of the citizens are conversant with the tropical diseases like malaria, cholera, yellow fever, tuberculosis, etc. Millions of Nigerian citizens have been infected with these diseases and have recovered. Notwithstanding the mortality rate in the country, most of the citizens having experienced one of them in the past, for example many people believe that malaria is preventable and treatable. With regards to cancer, it is a completely different reaction. At the mention of cancer, those around *feel sad, frightened, anxious, etc. The word cancer still evokes strong feelings notwithstanding the campaign and awareness being created in Nigeria by professional. In fact, most people in Nigeria tend to forget that a diagnosis of cancer no longer inescapably means death, yet death is still the first word that comes to mind two out of three people in Nigeria when they hear the word cancer* (Ropeik, 2023, 2).

In Nigeria, people worry about cancer for many different reasons. Some feel that they cannot afford the treatment of the disease. Therefore, their days are numbered. Some have seen friends or colleagues who have spent nearly all their earnings in trying to save a cancer patient. Few associate the disease to witchcraft. However, the greatest fear of cancer is the

mortality associated with it. In developing or undeveloped countries like Nigeria, once a diagnosis of cancer is made, the patients and the relatives assume that a death sentence has been passed on the patient (Obiora & Nwafor, 2019, 268). The individuals who are afraid are not totally wrong because cancer cure is expensive for the individual, the family and the society. Rich countries spend on cancer treatment each year. Cancer screening including mammography, pap smears, colorectal examinations, and tests of prostrate cancer cost a fortune (Dervan, 1999, 11).

At the mention of cancer so many questions come to the mind of most Nigerian citizens. Questions like; Is cancer curable? Is cancer contagious? Is cancer genetic? What causes cancer? How does cancer grow and spread? Can stress cause cancer? What is the most common cancer? Why is cancer on the rise? Can food cause cancer? The anxiety and worries increase when the citizens read up facts and figures of cancer rates. For example, U.S cancer rates that about 1.7 million cases are diagnosed every year. Each year, about 600.000 die of cancer. About 40 percent of people will develop cancer during their life time. About 80 percent of all cases are diagnosed in people 55 and older (Brezina, 2021, 7)

In the midst of this most dreaded diseases, most Nigerians fail to ask a fundamental question. What is cancer? Cancer is not just one disease, but a generic term used to encompass a group of more than two hundred diseases sharing common characteristics. From a clinical point of view, cancer is a large group of diseases, that vary in their age of onset, rate of growth, state of cellular differentiation, diagnostic detectability, invasiveness, metastatic potential, response to treatment and prognosis. From a molecular and cell biological point of view, however, cancer may be a relatively small number of diseases caused by similar molecular defects in cell function resulting from common types of alterations to a cell's gene (Khan, 2014, 331). Ultimately, according to the World Health Organization, cancer is a large group of diseases that can start in almost any organ or tissue of the body when abnormal cells grow uncontrollably, go beyond their usual boundaries to invade adjoining parts of the body and/or spread to other organs (WHO, 2023, 1).

Another issue that is worrisome is on the causes of cancer. There are different views of scholars, researchers, doctors, on this very issue but this work will adopt the stand of Sara Lindstrom who stated that the majority of cancers are caused by genetic changes caused by environmental and lifestyle factors, accounting for 90–95 percent of cases. Inherited genetics account for the remaining 5–10%. Environmental influences include, but are not limited to, lifestyle, economic, and behavioral factors, as well as pollution. Tobacco usage (25–30%), food and obesity (30–35%), infections (15–20%), radiation (both ionising and nonionizing, up to 10%), lack of physical activity, and pollution are all common environmental variables that contribute to cancer death (Lindstrom, 2021, 6).

From the psychological point of view, there is still a big debate on the role of stress as a cause of cancer. Although stress does not directly cause cancer, when someone is experiencing stress, he or she is more likely to engage in unhealthy habits. For example, reactions to stress can include poor diet, smoking, not eating or sleeping well, drinking too much alcohol, etc. Also, stress is known to directly affect the immune system. The bottom line is that when an individual is stressed out, his or her body produces stress hormones that can affect how well the immune system works. Stress makes the body fertile for cancer to settle and spread. So,

stress can lead to cancer progression, health behaviors and affect immune functioning (Penedo et al., 2008, 15).

Apart from the fact that people think that stress contributes to having cancer, there is this mindset of some persons who think that *cancer is contagious disease. If cancer is contagious, it would have spread to all the family members and all the medical practitioners who are taking care of them. This pseudo mentality makes some persons to avoid visiting cancer patients. This makes the victims to feel lonely, whereas they hunger for visits and support from friends. It is unfortunate that these group of persons fail to understand that cancer patients have a tremendous need for support from friends. As human beings, there are moments that some cancer patients feel worried, anxious and sad. The visit of friends and family members usually bring psychological relief and comfort to them.*

Rationale for the study

The rationale behind this study is to add our voices to that of other researchers who sustain that advances in researches in cancer have produced and is still producing significant opportunities to improve cancer prevention, detection and treatment. Insights about this disease have enabled scientist to identify new agents that are changing the paradigm of cancer research from the development of nonspecific, broadly toxic chemotherapies to the development of highly targeted combination of therapies (Sharly et al., 2010, 41). This study wants to highlight that cancer control planning is all about all actions that can reduce the impact of cancer and improve the quality of life of patients. Prevention, early detection and screening, diagnosis and treatment, palliative care, and psychological support are the components of cancer control that can reduce the burden of cancer. Again, this study seeks to understand the causes of cancer, the effects of various interventions, and to analyze the cancer burden, as well as to measure progress for feedback into the cancer plan (Kerr, 2016, 246).

Literature review

Self-efficacy: *It is a term used corresponding to a person's belief in their own competence. It is regarded as the belief that one is capable of performing in a certain manner to attain certain goals. It is believed that our personalized ideas of self-efficacy affect our social interactions in almost every way. Understanding how to foster the development of self-efficacy is a vitally important goal for positive psychology because it can lead to living a more productive and happy life (Singh, 2019, 81). Self-efficacy is very important for cancer patients because it boosts the confidence and adjustment of the cancer patients. Above all, it helps in addressing all the problems associated with cancer treatment (Schwarzer, 2016, 214). On the other hand, self-efficacy entirely ignored the effect of the surrounding environment, neighborhood, community on individuals' behaviors (*Scharlach & Hoshino, 2013, 5).

The Main effects theory*: states that social support has a significant linear effect promoting positive indicators of well-being and inhibiting negative indicators. In simple terms, one's quality of life is enhanced by the presence of caring and supportive relationships (Bailey et al, 1994, 130). A generalized beneficial effect of social support could occur because large social networks provide persons with a regular positive experience and a set of stable, socially rewarded roles in the community. This kind of support could be related to overall well-being because it provides positive effect, a sense of predictability and stability in one's life situation, and a recognition of self-worth (Cohen & Wills, 1985, 311). Social support plays an important role in protecting cancer patients from developing other problems like hypertension. Greater social support helps in reducing stress-related health behaviors, preventing or alleviating the harmful physiological responses to stress by improving the ability to cope with life*

stressors (Koenig et al., 2024, 400). The major criticism of this theory is that it neglects the inner power of the individual.

Aims and Specific Objectives

The aim of this research is to enlighten the common masses in Nigeria about the problem of cancer, what triggers the disease and best method to prevent it. Even when it occurs, psycho-social aspect should not be neglected. Psycho-social refers to the dynamic relationship between psychological and social dimensions of a person, where the one influences the other. The psychological dimension includes the internal, emotional and thought processes, feelings and reactions. The social dimension includes relationships, family and community networks, social values and cultural practices (Francis et al., 2015, 107). Psycho-social dimension is important because it promotes the wellbeing of the cancer patient. In addition, it depends on the combination of different disciplines to achieve this goal.

The specific objective of the research is to discover and detect early the symptoms of cancer. Again, to treat and prevent this disease. Detecting cancers when they are at their earliest stages, at especially premalignancy, ultimately translate into a higher cure rate. Unfortunately, when cancer is diagnosed and treated when it is too late and metastasis has already occurred and therapeutic modalities are very limited in their success due to the disease burden (Thongboonkerd & Klein, 2004, 94). The primary approach to cancer control will always be the provision of basic treatment and care. It is inconceivable that this would not be the case because of the immediacy of caring for a sick patient. To this effect, stage at diagnosis can be improved by awareness campaigns, but only when care is available, accessible, and affordable (Eeles et al, 2019, 1).

Psychological problems that cancer patients face in Nigeria

Cancer patients in Nigeria face many psychological problems. The following problems seem to be recurrent among patients in Nigeria.

Anxiety: The fundamental question that we need to ask is what is anxiety? It is not so easy to come up with a specific definition of anxiety because we at times confuse the term with fear. However, anxiety is defined as a universal experience and, as such, is a part of human condition. It serves as biological warning system that is activated by danger. It may also occur following loss or may arise from intrapsychic conflict, as in conflict between inner drives and external demands or between conflicting value systems. Anxiety is a distressing emotion usually associated with bodily discomfort. (Noyes & Hoehn-Saric, 1998, 1).

Cancer is threatening, and understandably many patients are anxious in response to that threat. Anxiety produces a number of typical symptoms and signs. Symptoms of autonomic over-activity include palpitation and sweating. Anxious behaviours such as restlessness and reassurance-seeking are a feature. Changes in thinking include apprehension, worry and poor concentration, and physical symptoms such as muscle tension or fatigue may occur (Stark & House, 2020, 1261). Cancer is threatening, and understandably many patients are anxious in response to that threat and anxiety appear to increase as the illness progresses. Anxiety has a significant impact on both morbidity and mortality which leads to deterioration in the quality of life of the patient. Symptoms of anxiety are well known in patient with cancer on various

modalities of treatment. These symptoms when worsen can gradually lead to impairment in the quality of life of the patient (Sahoonja et al., 2020, 14).

In Nigeria, the anxiety among cancer patients is pretty high because of certain reasons like cost of drug, poor access to screening and diagnostic services, etc. Again, each stage of the sickness has the anxiety that accompanies it. Most Nigerians are anxious about cancer because in most states there are very few Oncology Hospitals. Taking Enugu state in Nigeria as an example, the current metro area population of Enugu in 2024 is 876,000. This population cannot boast of five working oncology hospitals with good facilities. As the patient is in search of a good hospital, cancer spreads become more intense. Obviously, the feeling of anxiety will increase.

A. **Social isolation:** Social isolation can be described structurally as the state of having inadequacies of social interactions, an absence of contacts and connections with people, relatives, and companions or even with acquaintances on a micro-level, and with wide society on a macro-level (Masoom, 2016, 241). Social isolation is more than just absences of interactions with others who provide meaningful social, psychological and emotional support and connection. It is a state in which the individual lacks a sense of belonging socially, lacks engagement with others, has a minimal number of social contacts. Thus, affecting the quality of the relationship. In understanding social isolation objectively, one examines primary groups (family, friends, and neighbors) and secondary social groups (clubs, churches, work) (Scrimshaw et al., 2022, 277).

Cancer patients often speak about having reduced interactions with family and friends despite the increased use of social media to stay connected. Patients may withdraw from social interactions due to physical symptoms, concerns about infection risk, or because they prefer not to share information about their cancer diagnosis and treatment. Social isolation, whether necessary or voluntary, can increase sadness and loneliness and is a major factor in a lower quality of life for patients with cancer (Schneider et al., 2023, 432). Social isolation can lead to negative mental, social, and physical outcomes for individuals diagnosed with cancer. Social isolation has been shown to increase all-cause mortality and cancer-specific mortality rates, in addition to increasing the incidence of strokes and cardiovascular disease (Christensen et al, 2022, 466).

B. Depression: The word depression is one of the most commonly used word in the psychological world. The word itself is very ambiguous. Depression is a common disorder primarily characterized by either a low or depressed mood or a loss of interest or pleasure in nearly all activities. Many additional symptoms are often present in the disorder, such as changes in weight, appetite or sleep patterns, fatigue, difficulty with concentration or decision making, moving more slowly than usual or agitation, feelings of worthlessness or guilt, and suicidal thinking (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007, 240).

Depression is different from the daily sadness that one can encounter in life. Depression is the most common mood abnormality faced by cancer patients and can increase the risk of suicide for this vulnerable patient (The American cancer society, 2018, 347). Depressions affects both the immune system of the patient and indirectly weakens the resilience of the patient. When one's resilience is tampered, it will affect the courage, fortitude and determination that the

patient needs to face the medical treatment. The most common complaints are loss of interest in things you used to enjoy (even a simple pleasure, such as listening to your favorite music, could lose its appeal to you); feeling sad, blue, or down in the dumps, and being tearful or crying easily; and feeling depleted of energy and overcome with a paralyzing fatigue (Rosenbaum & Rosenbaum, 2005, 182).

Psychosocial support and interventions for cancer patients

There are different interventions which address both psychological and social needs of cancer patients. We will discuss some of them that affect Nigerian citizens.

a. **Counselling:** The Oxford dictionary of Psychology defines counselling as the practice or profession of applying psychological theories and communication skills to clients' personal problems, concerns, or aspirations (Colman, 2009, 178). Good counselling assists cancer patients to make informed decisions and cope better with their health conditions, helps clients to identify potential solutions to problems which can cause emotional turmoil, strengthen self-esteem, promotes behavioral change and optimal mental health, and helps them to lead more positive lives as well as prevent further spread of the disease (Asekun-Olarinmoye & Alebiosu, 2019, 338).

b. **Social support:** A social support group is a group of people who come together to talk about a challenge, experience and/ or role that they have in common without being judged, blamed, stigmatized or isolated. By joining support groups, people realize that they are not alone in their situation. The group is a forum in which members can share problems and concerns, brainstorm solutions, give each other advice and form friendship (Fanelli & Moyo, 2008, 1). When cancer patients and their caretakers take part in a group, they enjoy a lot of benefits, including these: sharing similar experiences with others. Many cancer patients find that this sharing of experience provide a sense of relief. Knowing that you are not alone can help. Again, the group teaches one new way of coping. People learn new ways of dealing with problems at support group meetings. Sharing one's approach could make another's life easier. Furthermore, social support eases loneliness. Participating in social support gives one an opportunity to make friends (Nelson, 2008, 47).

Conclusion

In Nigeria, cancer leads to over several deaths per annum. One of the major reasons that the fatality of cancer is on the rise in Nigeria is that majority of the citizens lack awareness of the early stage signs and symptoms of cancer. Nearly one third of the cases of cancer are treatable if detected early. However, many patients with cancer especially breast cancer, are diagnosed too late for curative interventions to be effective (Solima et al., 2013, 66). Early detection of cancer offers several benefits. For instance, early diagnosis increases the likelihood of successful treatment and improve survival rates. By detecting cancer in its infancy, when tumors are smaller and more localized, patients have a greater chance of undergoing curative treatment options, such as surgery, radiation therapy, or targeted therapy (Khatib, 2024, 37). Nigeria needs to save thousands of her citizens who are dying of cancer. However, awareness is the first step in battle against cancer in Nigeria.

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