

Journal Watch

What Patients with Cancer Want to Know About Pain: A Qualitative Study

Reference: Jacqueline L. Bender, Joanne Hohenadel, Jennifer Wong, Joel Katz, Lorraine E. Ferris, Cindy Shobbrook, David Warr, and Alejandro R. Jadad
J Pain Symptom Manage 2008;35:177-187.

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Abstract

Research indicates that patients feel more satisfied and obtain better health outcomes when they are able to discuss their questions with their health professionals. A better understanding of cancer patients' questions may help guide interventions to address their information needs and improve pain management. This study sought to explore and describe the questions that women with breast cancer have about pain related to cancer. Semistructured interviews were conducted with women with pain related to breast cancer or its treatment, recruited from a large teaching hospital in Toronto, Canada. Interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed. Data saturation was reached after 18 participants were interviewed. Analysis involved the identification of themes and the development of a taxonomy of questions about pain. In total, over 200 questions concerning seven main themes were identified: (1) understanding cancer pain, (2) knowing what to expect, (3) options for pain control, (4) coping with cancer pain, (5) talking with others with cancer pain, (6) finding help managing cancer pain, and (7) describing pain. The information collected suggests that formulating and articulating questions about pain is a context-dependent, time-intensive process that requires reflection, knowledge, and a good use of language. Patients have numerous and diverse questions about pain and its treatment, which may be difficult to address within the context of a typical consultation. To manage pain adequately, innovative efforts are needed to enable patients and health professionals to recognize, articulate, and answer such questions. Internet-based tools could provide some of these solutions.

Strengths:

- Well-designed qualitative descriptive study
- Specific steps taken to ensure credibility of findings, including detailed audit trail, independent data coding and respondent validation (i.e. reinsuring the participants viewpoints were accurately captured)
- Highlights importance of obtaining patient perspectives regarding cancer pain management

Weaknesses:

- Convenience sample of breast cancer patients from Breast Cancer and Pain Clinics in major urban setting (i.e. Toronto)
- Difficult to assess age of participants (reported as dichotomous variable i.e. 14 were > 55 years)

Relevance to Palliative Care:

- Highlights importance of encouraging patients to ask questions about pain, regardless of illness trajectory
- Internet-based strategies, as suggested by authors, may be helpful earlier in illness trajectory for patients, but are also relevant for family members (similar to resources available through the Canadian Virtual Hospice website, www.virtualhospice.ca)