ABSTRACT Recent research suggests a beneficial role of nutrition as possible supportive therapy for cancer patients. A national survey of oncology nurses has shown that nutrition-related issues are an important subject discussed during nurse–patient meetings. The authors applied the activation theory of information exposure to oncology nurses in regard to nutrition information. Findings suggest that oncology nurses who consider nutrition important at a personal level tend to discuss nutrition more with patients and to seek more information about nutrition and cancer. Personal rather than professional motives appear to be triggers for the information search. Implications for health care communication professionals are discussed. J. Nutr. 135: 1253–1255, 2005.

KEY WORDS: • nutrition • cancer • oncology • nurse

Any research saga that has a social component culminates with the need to communicate the research findings or its implications to the targeted population. In today’s world, dominated by the contrast between information overload and our selectivity regarding the media channels we use to gather information, having the right communication tool could prove essential for the success of any research enterprise.

Things get even more complicated when the subject is perceived by the audience as being a sensitive issue. In the United States, 1,285,000 new patients were diagnosed with cancer in 2002. In the same year, 555,000 people perished due to the illness (1).

Nurses, because of their close interaction with patients and patients’ perception of the nurse’s role (2), are an efficient channel for distributing health messages. For this reason, nurses’ perception and opinions of such nutritional products could have an important impact on improvements in diet for patients. Research by Lev and Ovwen (3) demonstrated the role of the oncology nurse as a social model for patient learning and confirmed the efficacy of patient education interventions structured according to Bandura’s social learning theory.

Carr-Hill et al. (5) and Cullum (6) suggested that nurses have a significant influence on patient outcomes in areas such as nutrition, patient hygiene, education and rehabilitation, and pain control and management.

METHODS

The Missouri School of Journalism, in collaboration with the School of Nursing at the University of Missouri, conducted, through its specialized research outlet, the Center for Advanced Social Research, a national survey of members of the Oncology Nursing Society (response rate of 64%). The survey data were used to assess the level of communication about nutrition in general and functional foods and dietary supplements in particular between oncology nurses and patients, and also to identify triggering elements that could be used to stimulate nurses’ involvement with learning and sharing information about functional foods.

RESULTS

The results were impressive. Of the oncology nurses, 96.7% said that they feel responsible for providing nutritional advice to their patients, with 85.5% of the nurses actually discussing nutrition issues with the patients. Whereas 63% of the oncology nurses state that they frequently receive questions about nutrition from their patients, 78.6% actually make nutritional recommendations to their patients. Quality of life of the cancer survivor was the foremost rationale identified by nurses as their justification for providing nutritional advice.
“Because if a patient has good nutrition, they are better able to tolerate effects of treatment, the side effects of chemo.”

“A lot of patients ask and nutrition is the second most significant factor in treating depression, huge issue for caregivers and for how the patients feel about themselves.”

Although nurses had a consensus regarding the importance of nutrition as supportive therapy for the cancer patient, the level of knowledge about dietary supplement vs. functional foods showed a notable gap: 99.7% of the nurses declared that they are familiar with the concept of dietary supplements, whereas only 15.8% declared the same about functional foods.

Increasing nurse’s knowledge of functional foods represents an important component in the quest for delivering accurate information about these products to cancer patients.

Among all medical service providers, the nurses report the greatest involvement with patients. Empirical studies (7–10) showed that, with respect to communication between nurses and cancer patients, nurses can have “blocking” and “facilitating” conduct, from stimulating patient “problem confession” to switching to other topics of discussion. Research by Lev et al. (3) showed the perception of the nurse by cancer patients was as a model and that identifying desired behavior in the nurse (or by listening to the model-nurse describing desired behavior) increases the confidence of the patient to achieve similar behavior. Bandura’s social cognitive theory (11) emphasizes the role of the social model as a determinant for changing social behavior. Bandura identified self-observation (desired behavior), judgment (comparison to the model), and self-efficacy (individual self-response to the behavior change) as criteria to assess the ability to control behavior.

By using Zaichkowsky’s Personal Involvement Instrument (12), the authors assessed whether information about functional foods and the nurse–patient communication process modify nurses’ nutritional and information search behavior and whether the modified behavior could serve as a social model to persuade behavior change in cancer patients.

The research has shown that an important component geared toward increased involvement is represented by the perception of the nurse that the information delivered is not only important at a professional level (better care for the patient), but it also carries a variable degree of personal importance (Fig. 1). The more the information learned is perceived by nurses as also delivering personal benefits, the more the acceptance of the information and the desirability to apply it in their routine practice and to communicate it to cancer patients.

The second important triggering component in the equation to increase involvement of the oncology nurse with functional foods is the nurse–patient communication itself (Fig. 2). As stated earlier, the patient perceives the nurse as a social model. Delivering pertinent initial information about functional foods that is used with success in the communication process (thus generating a certain degree of gratification) stimulates the active search for similar (or related) information to be further used in the nurse–patient communication process.

This cyclical approach is beneficial for both the nurse and the patient, and could prove an essential message component in the strategic communication campaign under development in the last year of funding.

The first step in this process is to provide the nurse with useful, novel information beyond what is currently available. To identify the nature and the extent of information about nutrition offered to nurses through professional peer-reviewed journals, the authors conducted a content analysis of the 4 most often read professional journals over a 2-y period. Of the 276 articles analyzed, only 14 (5.07%) made some kind of reference or discuss about nutrition. Of these articles (at a paragraph level), only 6.56% mention a functional food and only 2.18% mention learning about nutrition as having a positive value for the nurse.

CONCLUSION

Considering the above results, it is evident that one of the first steps to be taken is to conceive an outlet to distribute initial information about functional foods to the oncology nurses, followed by designing a dedicated information base that the interested nurses can access and use to increase their knowledge, hence their involvement, with the patient as the ultimate beneficiary of this process.


