

FEATURE ARTICLE

Identifying Signs and Symptoms of Intimate Partner Violence in an Oncology Setting

JoAnn Mick, RN, MSN, MBA, AOCN®, CNNA, BC

Domestic violence (DV), or intimate partner violence (IPV), is a prevailing problem in public health. Often, healthcare providers may be the first people that victims of DV will approach to reveal their problem or seek assistance. IPV is a pattern of control using assault and intimidating behaviors that has devastating effects on individuals, their families, and communities. Oncology nurses need to become familiar with common indicators of DV so that signs and symptoms of abuse can be identified when assessing patients in an oncology setting. Standards of oncology nursing practice support that the psychosocial impact of cancer on patients and their families or significant others needs to be considered at all stages of diagnosis and treatment. The psychosocial impact of other personal situations or concerns, such as IPV, can add to the complexity of cancer management. Routine screening for signs and symptoms of psychosocial distress helps identify patients who require additional interventions. Oncology nursing practice is based on a holistic approach to patient care, which supports that identification of physical and psychosocial needs are equally important. Oncology nursing provides many unique opportunities to help patients cope with cancer. Routine nursing assessment for signs and symptoms of abuse will provide an opportunity to assist patients with cancer to manage not only the life-threatening aspects of their diagnosis but also the life-threatening aspects of IPV.

Domestic violence (DV), or intimate partner violence (IPV), is a prevailing problem in public health (Family Violence Prevention Fund, 2004). IPV is a pattern of control using assault and intimidating behaviors that has devastating effects on individuals, their families, and communities (Family Violence Law Center, 2005). Standards of oncology nursing practice support that the psychosocial impact of cancer on patients and their families or significant others needs to be considered at all stages of diagnosis and treatment (Brant & Wickham, 2004; Harvey, 2003). The psychosocial impact of patients' personal situations or concerns can add to the complexity of cancer management. For example, patients living with DV may face multiple challenges as they manage the stress of an additional life-threatening experience with the diagnosis of cancer. Oncology nurses need to become familiar with common indicators of DV so that signs and symptoms of abuse can be identified when assessing patients in an oncology setting.

An individualized plan of care must address all of patients' identified psychosocial concerns to ensure optimal outcomes. Routine screening for signs and symptoms of psychosocial distress helps to identify patients who require additional interventions. Nursing care involves providing informational and emotional support in response to each identified concern (Fitch, 1999). Identification of IPV may be difficult because of

At a Glance

- ◆ Learning about intimate partner violence (IPV) can help oncology nurses identify and distinguish between signs and symptoms of abuse and cancer treatment side effects that may mask abuse.
- ◆ The holistic care approach of oncology nursing practice enables nurses to assess for the presence of IPV and provide informational and emotional support resources in response to patients' identified concerns.
- ◆ Routine assessment for signs and symptoms of IPV provides a unique opportunity for oncology nurses to assist patients in managing any complex, life-threatening aspects of abuse that they may experience during cancer treatment.

JoAnn Mick, RN, MSN, MBA, AOCN®, CNNA, BC, is an associate director of nursing research at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. No significant financial relationships to disclose. (Submitted April 2005. Accepted for publication November 21, 2005.)

Digital Object Identifier: 10.1188/06.CJON.509-513