EDITORIAL

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Living With Cancer: The Journey From Victim to Survivor

> "It is, of course, likely that the language about cancer will evolve in the coming years. It must change decisively, when the disease is finally understood and the rate of cure becomes much higher."
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> –S. Sontag, 1978, p. 88

We all know the statistics. Today, more than 10.5 million cancer survivors, representing 3.6% of the population, are living in the United States (National Cancer Institute, 2006). Much has changed in the decades since Sontag (1978) wrote *Illness as Metaphor* and articulated our societal perceptions that *cancer = death* and people with cancer were *victims.*

On May 6, 2007, the Discovery Channel aired a three-hour television program hosted by Ted Koppel, *Living With Cancer*, that was part documentary and part town hall meeting. The town hall portion of the program featured Leroy Sievers[a], an award-winning journalist with metastatic colon cancer; Senator John Edwards's wife, Elizabeth Edwards[b], an attorney, who has metastatic breast cancer; and Lance Armstrong[c], a former professional racing cyclist and seven-time Tour de France winner who is in complete remission from metastatic testicular cancer. They discussed their experiences in coping with cancer and represented the range of survivors we work with—one in complete remission and considered cured, one facing a recurrence, and one living with advanced metastatic disease.

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Many things struck me about the program. First, I was surprised that it was produced. A three-hour program discussing cancer is so different from the days when people whispered about or alluded to the disease indirectly. The topic is now part of our society's daily discourse. Second, the show followed Sievers' life over many months and featured comments from Edwards and Armstrong about their experiences. They described the changing nature of living with cancer and how they adapted to it on an almost daily basis.

As nurses, I think we come closest of all cancer care professionals to understanding the impact of cancer and its treatment on patients and their families. Even so, that understanding is not the same as living with the disease day in and day out. I was reminded how pervasive the effects of the disease and its treatment still are—despite the tremendous progress we have made. The program also reminded me that we only really have a snapshot—not a video—of the lives patients are living with cancer.

Sievers, Edwards, and Armstrong discussed the partnering role of various healthcare providers in dealing and living with cancer. Physicians were clearly their partners related to treatment and disease management and were discussed using various metaphors (e.g., the cancer team's quarterback, captain of the team).

Although military metaphors may still be used (e.g., winning the battle), they are being replaced by competitive and sports metaphors (Penson, Schapira, Daniels, Chabner, & Lynch, 2004). Perhaps that trend reflects Armstrong's influence on survivorship. The metaphoric cancer journey is also entering the language of many survivors.

An oncology nurse was present in Sievers' video clips but only peripherally, which may or may not have been an artifact of the editing process. Any real discussion of the role of oncology nurses in cancer care did not occur until the town hall portion of the program. Oncology Nursing Society President Georgia M. Decker, MS, RN, CS-ANP, AOCN®, was in the audience and asked Sievers, Edwards, and Armstrong about the presence and role of oncology nurses. Sievers recognized his nurse in the audience and talked about how she was his partner on his journey in a very different way

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[a] Sievers' blog and podcast, "My Cancer," are available on National Public Radio at www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5503400.

[b] Edwards (2006) is the author of *Saving Graces: Finding Solace and Strength From Friends and Strangers.*

[c] Armstrong founded the Lance Armstrong Foundation (www.livestrong.org).

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