

Spiritual Issues of Family Members in a Pancreatic Cancer Chat Room

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Purpose/Objectives: To describe spiritual issues addressed by users of a pancreatic cancer informational Web site.

Design: Qualitative, descriptive.

Setting: The patient and family chat room of Johns Hopkins Hospital's pancreatic cancer Web site.

Sample: 600 postings on the pancreatic cancer Web site.

Methods: Identification of categories and themes in Web postings using the constant comparison method of content analysis.

Main Research Variables: Spirituality, relationship of the person posting a message (poster) to the person with cancer.

Findings: Relationship of the poster to the person with pancreatic cancer was explicit in 68% (n = 410) of the 600 postings, and 83% of those 410 postings indicated that the poster was a family member. Issues of spirituality appeared in 19% (n = 114) of the 600 postings and addressed four themes: spiritual convergence, reframing suffering, hope, and acceptance of the power of God and eternal life. Six percent of postings were by family members reporting on the death of their loved ones, suggesting that the site also served a bereavement function.

Conclusions: Family members of patients with pancreatic cancer sought and received spiritual comfort in a variety of forms in an Internet-based cancer chat room.

Implications for Nursing: Nurse developers of cancer information Web sites should periodically assess how the sites are being used and apply the information to the refinement of the sites to better meet user needs. Further study is needed to develop and evaluate cancer Web sites as an evolving medium for providing spiritual support to family members of patients with life-threatening forms of cancer.

Key Points . . .

- ▶ Pancreatic cancer is one of the most aggressive forms of cancer, and patients and their families need immediate access to information about its progression and treatment as well as ways to manage its accompanying distress.
- ▶ Johns Hopkins Hospital's pancreatic cancer Web site chat room is a source of spiritual support for many of its users, most of whom are family members of patients with pancreatic cancer.
- ▶ Further study is needed to determine the extent to which other cancer information chat rooms are used as sources of spiritual support and how Web sites might be refined to sustain this important function.

Web site, the purpose of the current study was to describe the spiritual issues discussed in those postings and consider how cancer information Web sites might be developed further to provide spiritual support to patients facing life-threatening forms of cancer. Although most messages were posted by family members, the few postings by patients with pancreatic

Pancreatic cancer is one of the most aggressive forms of cancer. Less than 24% of patients with the disease survive one year after diagnosis, and the overall five-year survival rate is only 15% (American Cancer Society, 2005; Li, Xie, Wolff, & Abbruzzese, 2004). High mortality rates and limited survival time provide patients and their families with little opportunity to gather information about the disease, its treatment, and ways to manage the distress of terminal illness. Many in such situations seek information on the Internet.

While evaluating the effect of a frequently-asked-questions (FAQs) educational module on users of Johns Hopkins Hospital's pancreatic cancer Web site (Coleman et al., 2005), the authors were surprised to find spiritual issues among the information being exchanged by users of the site's chat room (see Figure 1). Because the authors found only one other study in the literature that noted spirituality on a cancer information

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Digital Object Identifier: 10.1188/06.ONF.239-244