

Cancer: Caring and Conquering

Connie R. Curran

Enlisting Medical-Surgical Nurses in the Battle Against Cancer

Why a column on cancer in a journal targeted at medical-surgical nurses? Medical-surgical nurses are the backbone of our health care delivery system. You are there — on the units of our country's hospitals and nursing homes, in the clinics, the homes, and the communities. If patient care is being delivered, medical-surgical nurses are there. If diseases are being conquered, medical-surgical nurses are there.

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Note: This column is made possible through an educational grant from C-Change, a Washington, DC, based organization comprising the nation's key cancer leaders from government, business, and nonprofit sectors. These cancer leaders share the vision of a future where cancer is prevented, detected early, and cured or is managed successfully as a chronic illness. The mission of C-Change is to leverage the combined expertise and resources of its members to eliminate cancer as a (major) public health problem at the earliest possible time. C-Change is both a forum and a catalyst for identifying issues and major challenges facing the cancer community and for initiating collaborative actions to complement the efforts of individual C-Change members. Medical-surgical nurses are invited to learn more about this important organization by visiting www.ndoc.org

When the public seeks advice about the quantity and quality of life, it is you that they turn to and trust.

As a nurse, a two-time cancer survivor, and the executive director of *C-Change: America's Coalition to Conquer Cancer*, I need your help to conquer this terrible disease. In 2005, cancer will claim over a half million of your family, friends, and co-workers. More Americans will die of cancer in the next 14 months than have perished in every war our nation has ever fought — combined (Leaf, 2004). One in every two men and one in every three American women will develop cancer, and the incidence increases with age. As a profession that is 94% female with an average age close to 50, one in three of our nurses will develop cancer. As the baby boomers become members of the AARP, our country will experience a huge increase in the incidence of cancer. Approximately 1.4 million new cases were diagnosed in 2004 and one in four of every deaths was caused by cancer.

Cancer Basics

Cancer starts when cells in a part of the body begin to grow out of control. While normal body cells grow, divide, and die, cancer cells continue to grow, divide, and keep forming new abnormal

cells. All cancers involve the malfunction of genes that control cell division and cell growth. It is the mutation of genes that allows the cells to start their out-of-control growth. Both internal and external factors influence the development of cancer. The major risk factors are age, sex, family history, environmental factors, and lifestyle choices. Smoking accounts for one-third of all cancer deaths.

Signs and symptoms of cancer depend on the size of the cancer and how much the cancer affects the surrounding structures. The most common symptoms are fever, fatigue, unexplained weight loss, pain, and changes in the skin.

The extent and severity of a person's cancer is described through a process of staging. Cancers are staged 0 to 4; the higher the number, the more extensive the disease. Staging is critical to selecting the most effective type of treatment. Obviously, treatment is most successful when the cancer is found early and before it spreads. The treatment choices vary depending on the type of cancer, the stage of cancer, one's age, one's health status, and personal preference. It is important to remember that patients should be part of the decision process in making a treatment choice.

The four major types of treatment are surgery, radiation, bio-

logic therapies, and chemotherapy. The goal of surgery is to remove the cancer. The goal of radiation is to destroy the cancer cells and damage their genetic material so that it is impossible for the cells to continue to grow. The biologic therapies are also known as immunotherapy. They use the body's immune system to fight cancer. Chemotherapy is the administration of powerful medications to poison the cancer cells. There are many new treatments such as hormone therapy, laser therapy, targeted drugs, alternative therapies, and complementary therapies.

Inform, Educate, Treat, and Conquer

Many new treatments are being developed because of recent discoveries resulting from the science of genomics. The key to rapid development of new

treatments is participation in clinical trials. Only 3% of all adult cancer patients participate in trials, while 85% of children participate in trials and that is why we have made such significant progress against childhood cancers. I participated in a clinical trial and it saved my life.

Cancer prevention is related to good nutrition, physical activity, and avoiding tobacco. Early detection is dependent upon self-exams, mammograms, pap tests, blood tests, and endoscopy. Somehow it seems so simple to write about and so difficult to practice. Although I had annual mammograms, I found my breast lump in the shower. There is no substitute for diligence.

Future columns in this "Cancer: Caring and Conquering" series will be written by Linda H. Yoder, PhD, MBA, RN, AOCN®, FAAN, program director, evi-

dence-based practice, outcomes and research education institute, Adventist HealthCare, Rockville, MD. Dr. Yoder is a highly experienced nurse clinician and educator, and *MEDSURG Nursing* Editorial Board Member. She will bring you the latest information regarding cancer screening, prevention, smoking cessation, clinical trials, treatments, resources for you and your patients, and much more.

I am asking medical-surgical nurses to please join me in this battle against cancer; the life you save may be your own or a loved one. I am hoping that when there is an opportunity to inform, educate, treat, and conquer this terrible illness, you will be there. ■

Reference

Leaf, C. (2004, March 29). Why we're losing the war on cancer (and how to win it). *Fortune Magazine*, pp. 76-94.