

# Whisperings of Ovarian Cancer: Acknowledging Women's Voices

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Ovarian cancer is described as being a whisper because it is challenging to diagnose at an early stage. Women need the voice to respond to the whisperings and nurses need to listen and acknowledge these voices. The purpose of this descriptive qualitative study is to examine personal stories of ovarian cancer within the framework of Women's Ways of Knowing (WWK) to understand how women voice their "whisperings of ovarian cancer" and their interactions with healthcare providers. The importance of listening and acknowledging a woman's voice is illustrated by the five categories of knowing delineated by WWK. The categories of knowing are silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge. Listening for a woman's voice, acknowledging her voice, and being an advocate for her voice are key components of holistic care. Listening may play an instrumental role in the early diagnosis of ovarian cancer.

Ovarian cancer is referred to as the silent killer because symptoms tend to be noticed when cancer is in an advanced stage (Goff, Mandel, Melancon, & Muntz, 2004). Despite this belief, research has demonstrated that women are experiencing identifiable symptoms up to a year before an ovarian cancer diagnosis (Goff et al., 2004, 2007; Goff & Muntz, 2008). Some refer to the disease as whispering because the early symptoms are subtle and the importance of women "listening" to their bodies is stressed (Lehman, 2007). A statement on the National Ovarian Cancer Coalition ([NOCC], 2006) Web site says "Ovarian cancer . . . it whispers, so listen!" Listening to the whispers as well as giving the whisper volume so it can be heard is essential. Women experiencing the vague but identifiable symptoms of ovarian cancer need the voice to respond to the whispering of their bodies, collectively and individually. NOCC is one of the organizations that give volume to the whispers in a collective and supportive manner. Women need to add volume to the whispers only they can hear and healthcare providers need to acknowledge and listen to their voices.

Listening with compassion is fundamental to nursing and is a basic component of the assessment process. Understanding how women develop knowledge and use their voices is essential in the provision of holistic nursing care to all women seeking healthcare. Listening to women and identifying their symptoms is an obvious task, but nurses also need to consider women's ways of knowing and the strength of women's voices to optimize screening, early detection, and timely care for ovarian cancer. Women's Ways of Knowing (WWK) is a theory of women's development and their thinking of knowledge, evidence, reality, truth, and authority (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997). It is a theoretical framework that can be used to emphasize the importance of listening to women as they are screened in any healthcare setting, especially for the early symptoms of ovarian cancer. The purpose

## At a Glance

- ◆ Listening is fundamental to nursing.
- ◆ Women's Ways of Knowing is a theoretical model that can be used to emphasize listening to women as they are screened for ovarian cancer.
- ◆ Women are at various stages of knowing when they encounter the healthcare system.

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## Literature Review

A review of the literature was conducted using the CINHAL<sup>®</sup> database. To begin the search, the key words, *ovarian cancer*, *cancer screening*, *female*, and *early detection*, resulted in 116 articles. The literature included discussions of evidence-based screening practices, recommended diagnostic tests, and the

Anita Smith, PhD, RN, is an associate faculty member in the College of Nursing at the University of South Alabama in Mobile. No financial relationships to disclose. Mention of specific products and opinions related to those products do not indicate or imply endorsement by the *Clinical Journal of Oncology Nursing* or the Oncology Nursing Society. (Submitted May 2008. Accepted for publication June 23, 2008.)

Digital Object Identifier:10.1188/08.CJON.913-920