Balancing Illness and Parental Demands: Coping With Cancer While Raising Minor Children

Corinne Rashi, RN, MSc(A), Trinity Wittman, RN, MSc(A), Argerie Tsimicalis, RN, PhD, and Carmen G. Loiselle, RN, PhD

Cancer profoundly affects patients and their family members, posing unique and pressing challenges to parents with minor children (Golby, 2014; Weaver, Rowland, Alfano, & McNeel, 2010). In the United States, about 20% of recently diagnosed survivors have minor children residing in the household (Weaver et al., 2010). In Canada, about 30% of newly diagnosed patients with cancer are aged from 20–59 years (Canadian Cancer Society’s Advisory Committee on Cancer Statistics, 2013), which are prime childbearing and parenting years.

Existing literature suggests that parents with cancer struggle to balance their own needs with those of their family (Golby, 2014; Helseth & Ulfsaet, 2005), often prioritizing their children’s needs over their own self-care (Elmberger, Bolund, Magnusson, Lützén, & Andershed, 2008; Stiffler, Haase, Hosei, & Barada, 2008). Parents strive to be “good” parents (Semple & McCance, 2010) by staying strong for their children (Asbury, Lalayiannis, & Walshe, 2014; Billhult & Segesten, 2003), spending more time with them (Phillips, 2014; Shands, Lewis, & Zalsi, 2000), trying to make the best of the situation (Helseth & Ulfsaet, 2005), and minimizing disruptions to family life (Bell & Ristovski-Slijepcevic, 2011).

Despite the documented importance for healthcare providers to anticipate and appreciate the challenges for parents with cancer, their psychosocial needs (Ernst, Beierlein, et al., 2013) and tangible needs (Gould, Grassau, Manthorne, Gray, & Fitch, 2006) often remain inadequately addressed. Proposed timely interventions include recommending counseling and support services for parents and children (Golby, 2014; Semple & McCaughan, 2013), providing tips for managing family life (Semple & McCancer, 2010), educating parents about children’s reactions to parental cancer (Hasson-Ohayon & Braun, 2011), discussing when and how to share cancer information in an age-appropriate manner with children (Asbury et al., 2014; Phillips, 2014), and implementing instrumental support, such as child care, meals, and housekeeping (Gould et al., 2006).

Although providing crucial insights, the existing research focuses disproportionately on young women with breast cancer, which underscores the need to more generally explore parents’ experiences (both