Surviving Cancer and Cancer Treatment

I often think of a conversation I once had with a patient of mine. After receiving her last chemotherapy treatment, she grabbed me by the hand as I stood up to leave the room. “When will I see you again?” she asked. I responded with a joke: “Aren’t you glad to be rid of me?” She laughed, as did I, and then asked, “Seriously, you won’t be taking care of me anymore? Just like that?”

As oncology nurses, we often consider our primary focus to be getting our patients through their treatments. We educate them and their families, assess for side effects and complications, manage their symptoms, offer psychosocial support, and provide palliative and hospice care. But as patients live longer, moving through multiple treatment cycles and long remissions, or are cured, what is our responsibility to them? Do we pull out of their lives, “just like that?”

As oncology nurses, we must consider the importance of policy change.

Perhaps we are now at a pivotal time when a sufficient number of people have survived cancer and are beginning to demand health care specific to their needs. Many resources are available to help us broaden our knowledge base on survivorship, including the following.

- ACS (www.cancer.org/docroot/home)
- American Society of Clinical Oncology (www.asco.org)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Action Plan for Cancer Survivorship (www.cdc.gov/cancer/survivorship/overview.htm)
- Lance Armstrong Foundation (www.livestrong.org)
- NCCS’s Cancer Survival Toolbox® (www.cancersurvivaltoolbox.org)
- ONS (www.ons.org/clinical/Survivorship) (includes links to Internet resources, positions, and articles on survivorship from CJON and the Oncology Nursing Forum)

Much research is needed to develop evidence-based guidelines for the care of cancer survivors. I am particularly interested in receiving manuscripts on survivorship issues. For now, maybe we all can take a few minutes to discuss with each and every patient the salient points of cancer survivorship—that many patients do survive long term, that we are learning more and more about the aftercare that survivors need, and that we will be there for them after their treatment is completed, “just like that.”