Linking Cancer and Intimate Partner Violence: The Importance of Screening Women in the Oncology Setting

Sandra K. Cesario, PhD, RNC, FAAN, Judith McFarlane, RN, DrPH, FAAN, Angeles Nava, PhD, RN, Heidi Gilroy, MSN, APHN-BC, and John Maddoux, MA

Millions of women in the United States experience physical abuse because of intimate partner violence (IPV) that results in injuries, social and family dysfunction, mental health disorders, chronic pain and illness, and death. Cancer causes a quarter of the deaths of women in the United States. When IPV and a cancer diagnosis intersect, a special population of women with unique needs is created. The purpose of the current study was to determine the rates of IPV and the types of cancer reported by women seeking services for IPV. Safety, community agency use, severity of violence, danger, psychological distress, post-traumatic stress disorder, self-efficacy, social support, pain, and marginality also were assessed. Three hundred abused women were interviewed in person to determine their health, safety, and functioning. Of the 300 women, eight reported receiving a cancer diagnosis, and most of those women had cervical cancer. The prevalence of cervical cancer reported by abused women was 10 times higher than the general population. Higher danger scores and risk for revictimization were reported. Increased awareness of the potential connection between IPV and cancer is needed, and evidence-based strategies that promote IPV screening in the oncology setting should be developed.