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

Cancer incidence and mortality in the United States has decreased slightly since 1990, but it remains a primary health concern. About 25% of all deaths in the United States are attributed to malignancies (Siegel, Naishadham, & Jemal, 2012). Women who have experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) are diagnosed with cancer, particularly cervical cancer, at higher rates than women who have not been abused (Coker, Hopenhayn, DeSimone, Bush, & Crofford, 2009; Dutton, Goodman, Lennig, Murphy, & Kaltman, 2006). A higher incidence of cervical cancer is reported among women who have experienced sexual abuse as adults and children, when compared to women who have experienced other forms of abuse or have not experienced abuse at all (Quinlivan, Petersen, Davy, & Evans, 2004). Chronic stress, depression, lower self-efficacy, smoking, multiple intimate partners, sexual abuse, and childhood physical abuse may be contributing factors that lead to the higher incidence of cancer among adult women who report abuse (Champion, Piper, Holden, Korte, & Shain, 2004; Chida, Hamer, Wardle, & Steptoe, 2008; Dalton, Boesen, Ross, Schapiro, & Johansen, 2002; Fuller-Thomson & Brennenstuhl, 2009; Hamer, Chida, & Molloy, 2009). Although accurate statistics are difficult to compile, an estimated 1.3 million women in the United States are affected by physical assault by an intimate partner each year (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2013). That large group of women who have experienced abuse is less likely to receive preventive women’s healthcare services, including Papanicolaou (Pap) testing and mammography (Gandhi et al., 2010; Farley, Golding, & Minkoff, 2002; Lemon, Verhoek-Offedahl, & Donnelly, 2002; Quinlivan et al., 2004; Wilson, Silberberg, Brown, & Yaggy, 2007). In some instances, women have reported feeling that the abuse could have caused the cancer (Sawin, Laughon, Parker, & Steeves, 2009). Because of emotional and financial strain precipitated by a cancer diagnosis, one study suggested...