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 of this descriptive qualitative study is to examine personal stories of ovarian cancer within the framework of WWK to understand how women voice their “whisperings of ovarian cancer” and their interactions with healthcare providers.

Literature Review

A review of the literature was conducted using the CINHAL® 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