The Importance of Assessing Sexuality: A Patient Perspective

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A cancer diagnosis can have an overwhelming effect on patients’ sexuality. Patients can suffer physically and emotionally from the side effects of cancer treatments. Nurses and physicians often fail to recognize the importance of the sexuality assessment to patients. The purpose of this article is to discuss sexuality from the perspectives of patients with cancer. Fifty-two patients were asked to define sexuality and its meaning to them. The results demonstrated that patients’ definitions of sexuality can take on many different meanings. Only a small number of patients stated that sexuality was addressed by their nurse or physician. Many patients wished someone had asked them about or brought up the topic of sexuality. The results support the value and importance of performing a sexuality assessment in patients with cancer.

At a Glance
• Nurses and physicians often fail to recognize the importance of sexuality assessments to patients.
• The definition of sexuality differs greatly among patients.
• Surveyed patients wished someone had either asked about or addressed sexuality with them.

Defining Sexuality and Sexual Health

Sexuality or sexual functioning are broad terms that include social, emotional, and physical components. Partner issues such as the couple’s sexual history, the partner’s ability to function sexually, communication issues, and marital stresses are important factors to consider (Barton, Wilwerding, Carpenter, & Loprinzi, 2004). The World Health Organization’s (WHO’s) definition of sexuality is: “A central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, and social well-being that relates to one’s sexuality” (WHO, 2002). The way people experience and express sexuality is different for each individual and can be influenced by biologic, psychological, social, cultural, and religious factors. WHO defined sexual health as: ‘Physical,