The Importance of Work

Two women recently raised issues about their work that made me think more about it. One was about to return to work after being out on short-term disability because of breast cancer treatment. She had been the manager of a busy department and was very concerned about her ability to return to work and resume her responsibilities because she was experiencing “chemo brain.” The other woman had tremendous support from her coworkers who picked up some of her work during her cancer treatment. After her treatment was over, her coworkers expected her to manage her normal workload. However, chronic cancer-related fatigue made that very difficult to do. What struck me about these stories was the lack of information and resources available to help these women deal with work-related issues.

Although 60% of cancer survivors are older than 65 and may already be retired from the workforce, 39% are 20–65 years of age (National Cancer Institute, 2009). In a meta-analysis of cancer survivors and work (de Boer, Taskila, Ojajärvi, van Dijk, & Verbeek, 2009), cancer survivors were more likely to be unemployed than the general population. Of the studies that collected reasons for unemployment, physical limitations and/or cancer-related symptoms were most frequently cited.

For children with cancer, returning to school is the equivalent of adults going back to work. Pediatric oncology has long addressed school issues in children. School tutors are available at some hospitals. The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society’s (2009) Trish Greene Back to School Program for Children With Cancer was designed to allow communication among healthcare professionals, parents, children with cancer, and school personnel regarding the return to school and its related activities. Resources about reintegrating children into the classroom are available for parents and educators and include videos and printed pieces aimed at classmates and teachers that describe how children with cancer feel, why they may look different, what type of treatment they have undergone, and any special needs they may have. The materials are available through all of the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society’s local chapters.

Why haven’t we designed programs for adults who are returning to work after a cancer diagnosis?

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References


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