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 than unemployed employees to address the barriers they may face. We might want to think about how work-friendly some of our treatments are and how well symptoms are managed. For example, how many of us offer appointments or treatments late in the day or on a Saturday to accommodate those who are trying to work? What fatigue interventions are we using? We can start by asking our patients about their work, their concerns, and how we might get them help to address the barriers they may face. We have much to learn from our pediatric colleagues and their school programs.

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

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