The Internet as a Source of Health Information: Experiences of Cancer Survivors and Caregivers With Healthcare Providers

Maria C. Dolce, PhD, RN, NEA-BC, FACHE

Data from the Health Information National Trends Survey examining health and cancer information seeking in the United States revealed divergent patterns between actual and preferred sources of health information during cancer survivorship (Hesse, Arora, Beckjord, & Finney Rutten, 2008; Hesse et al., 2005). Although cancer survivors reported their healthcare provider as their preferred source, the Internet was the first and most common source of health information. Little is known about how the Internet as a source of health information and resources is changing healthcare relationships in cancer survivorship.

Dissatisfaction with information and communication during clinical encounters with healthcare professionals has propelled cancer survivors to search for health information and resources on the Internet (Chen & Siu, 2001; Pereira, Koski, Hanson, Bruera, & Mackey, 2000; Sharf, 1997; Ziebland, 2004; Ziebland et al., 2004). Factors contributing to dissatisfaction and demand for health information include insufficient time spent on communication during the clinical encounter and healthcare providers’ inability to keep up with the most current information and advances in cancer care (Anderson, Rainey, & Eysenbach, 2003).

Survivor empowerment emerges as a major construct in healthcare relationships in the context of Internet information seeking (Broom, 2005b; Dickerson, Boehmke, Ogle, & Brown, 2006; Pitts, 2004; Sharf, 1997; Ziebland et al., 2004). Well-informed survivors report increased confidence in their interactions with healthcare providers and greater engagement in care decisions as evidenced by asking more questions, requesting tests and treatments, and being better prepared for discussions (Bass et al., 2006; Broom, 2005b; Dickerson et al., 2006; Newnham et al., 2006). Empowering behaviors such as bringing information from online searches to the clinical encounter and questioning healthcare providers have been perceived by both survivors and healthcare providers as challenging the boundaries of medical expertise (Broom, 2005b; Brotherton, Clarke, & Quine, 2002; Dickerson et al., 2006; Pitts, 2004; Sharf, 1997; Ziebland et al., 2004).

Current evidence suggests a paradoxical influence of the Internet on healthcare relationships. Several studies...