Nurses’ Attitudes Toward Clinical Trials at a Comprehensive Cancer Center

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Purpose/Objectives: To identify nurses’ attitudes and beliefs toward cancer clinical trials and their perceptions about factors influencing patients’ participation in these trials.

Design: Descriptive.

Setting: National Cancer Institute-designated comprehensive cancer center.

Sample: 417 nurses employed at the cancer center were surveyed; 250 (60%) subjects responded.

Methods: 59-item questionnaire.

Main Research Variables: Nurses’ attitudes toward clinical trials and perceptions of patient understanding of and influences on participation in clinical trials.

Findings: 96% of nurses reported that participation in clinical trials is important to improving standards of care; only 56% believed that patients should be encouraged to participate in trials if they had cancer. In multiple regression analyses, older age and being a research nurse were significant predictors of positive attitudes toward clinical trials. Work setting also was a significant predictor of nurses’ perceptions of patients’ understanding of treatment. Overall, nurses reported that an investigational therapy should have at least a 50% chance of success prior to being offered to patients.

Conclusions: Nurses generally reported that clinical trials are important to improve standards of care; however, attitudes concerning patient participation in clinical trials and perceptions of patient understanding differed by work setting. Nurses have high expectations regarding the benefits of investigational therapy.

Implications for Nursing Practice: Nurses play a critical role in the care of participants in cancer clinical trials. Targeted interventions that involve nurses to enhance appropriate patient accrual, patient understanding, and patient decision making should result in improved patient care in centers conducting clinical trials.

Clinical trials are an important part of contemporary oncology practice, allowing for development of new treatment strategies and increased knowledge of malignant disease. The conduct of clinical trials involving human subjects raises significant ethical concerns (Emanuel, Wendler, & Grady, 2000; Grady, 1991; Schutta & Burnett, 2000). These concerns include issues about patients’ understanding of their involvement in clinical trials, expectations from the research, and the quality of the informed consent process (Ganz, 1990; Penman at al., 1984). Patients often do not understand the purpose of clinical trials and may have unrealistic expectations regarding their benefits (Cassileth, Lusk, Miller, & Hurwitz, 1982; Daugherty et al., 1995). These factors are of particular importance in the field of oncology because patients with cancer often are more vulnerable as a result of the seriousness of their illness and are willing to seek therapy they perceive may offer benefit regardless of potential toxicities (Cheng et al., 2000; Slevin et al., 1995).

The study of decision making in clinical trials has concentrated on patient, community, and physician understanding and attitudes (Bujorian, 1988; Cheng et al., 2000; Cox & Avis, 1996; Ganz, 1990; Neufeld, Degner, & Dick, 1993; Tabak, 1995; Yoder, O’Rourke, Etnyre, Spears, & Brown, 1997). However, patients have an additional element in their decision-making process, namely the impact of nurses. Nurses are involved in clinical trials both as clinical investigators and as caregivers for patients undergoing experimental treatments (Arrigo, 1991; Cassidy, 1993; McEvoy, Cannon, & MacDermott, 1991; Walczak, McGuire, Haisfield, & Beezley, 1994). In the clinical and research settings, nurses facilitate...