

Doctoral Degree Scholarship in Cancer Nursing

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Abstract:

Breast cancer is one of the most common types of cancer. In fact, there are over 3 million breast cancer survivors (BCS) living in the United States. The largest risk factor for breast cancer is aging. Older adults, age 65 years or older, make up approximately 43% of all patients diagnosed with breast cancer and this number is expected to grow exponentially as our society ages. It is predicted that by the year 2030 more than 20% of the U.S. population will be 65 years of age or older compared to 13% in 2010, this highlights the need to focus on symptom management of older BCS. Cognitive impairment is a common symptom after cancer and cancer treatment. It is estimated that up to 75% of all BCS report some level of cognitive impairment, which can be a severe, disruptive, and persistent problem for BCS. Cognitive impairment has also been associated with negative health outcomes. However, there is a lack of research specific to older BCS. We understand that older BCS are at increased risk for cognitive impairment due to a number of factors including the normal aging process; however, few studies have focused specifically on the older BCS and none have examined the prevalence and impact of cognitive impairment. This topic has been identified as a research priority for multiple national organizations including The National Cancer Institute.

Through my clinical and research experiences with oncology patients, including BCS, I understand that cognitive impairment may be severe, disruptive and potentially debilitating. As a result, I would like to address this research priority and gap in knowledge regarding cognitive impairment in the older BCS. Specifically, I am interested examining the prevalence and impact of cognitive impairment on functional ability and health-related quality of life in older BCS. In this research, I will also explore the influence of other symptoms (depressive symptoms, anxiety, and sleep disturbance) on the cognitive impairment in the older BCS. My long-term goal is to develop a program of research which, will improve functional ability and health-related quality of life and ultimately improve the lives of older BCS.