

PROJECT PORTRAIT

Exploring the Experiences of Breast Cancer Survivors # 46 (2012)



What is this project about?

This research was conducted to contribute to the knowledge base of the Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA).

Research indicates that breast cancer is diagnosed in approximately one in twenty-nine women in South Africa. Women with lower income often experience lengthy waiting periods between diagnosis and treatment. Very little qualitative research has been conducted to explore lived experiences of patients with breast cancer.

This project set out to explore women's experiences at various stages of treatment. Understanding better what it is like for them will help CANSA and others to develop important emotional and other support for women on this journey.

The research

To understand women's lived experiences of breast cancer, this study explored experiences encountered during the waiting period between diagnosis and treatment as well as the associations with breast cancer and its treatment, and how this impacted on women's identities.

Research was conducted at two of CANSA's care homes in Tygerberg and Athlone where women from rural areas stay during the treatment period.

What did the researcher do?

A qualitative method was applied. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with five black and colored breast cancer patients residing at two of CANSA's care homes.



Approximately one in twenty-nine women in South Africa is diagnosed with breast cancer.



What you need to know:

Receiving a breast cancer diagnosis is a devastating experience. For women using public health facilities there is often a long waiting period between being told that they have breast cancer and receiving treatment – and very little support. This difficult journey could be made easier by better education about breast cancer, especially in rural communities, and support for the patients and their families. Many groups in society can be involved in providing such support.

The research findings

Themes emerging from the open-ended research questions emphasized various as well as common experiences, outlooks and coping mechanisms made by women diagnosed with breast cancer.

Women's support needs varied considerably depending on the stage and phase of the breast cancer trajectory.

Patients emphasized the need for:

- better education around the development and identification of breast cancer, specifically in rural and outlying areas;
- better access to screening facilities;
- counseling for family members;
- somebody to help them understand and adjust to the diagnosis and maintain a positive outlook;
- someone to talk to about self-image issues and patients' identities as women;
- a need for support networks and groups with other breast cancer survivors; and

- having one dedicated health provider (rather than seeing someone different at each consultation) whom patients can consult about available treatment options and the procedures they involve.

Using the research

This study highlights that each patient's experience is unique and that addressing differences in experiences amongst breast cancer patients is essential.

Vital to understand is that a breast cancer patient's healing process needs to be addressed in a holistic manner, rather than solely focusing on the physical body. The stress that overwhelms breast cancer patients and their families needs to be reduced and managed. Illness anxieties often inform adjustment. As such, counseling and pre-social support is felt to be very empowering, because leading a life of quality in the face of a life-threatening disease requires huge effort.

The study was completed in **November 2012**.

Want to know more?

Research was carried out by Anja Mulder, in fulfillment of an Honours degree in Gender Studies at the University of Cape Town. This summary is based on her study "Exploring the Experiences of Breast Cancer Survivors at Various Stages of Treatment: An Analysis of the Construction of Breast Cancer and of Femininity". The project was supervised by Dr Adelene Africa. The thesis is available on the Co-op website.

Keywords:

Breast cancer, Gender, Patient advocacy, Health disparities, Rural area.

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