

## EFFECTS OF CHEMOTHERAPY ON THE LIVES OF CANCER PATIENTS: THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE OF A GROUP IN THE AMAZON REGION

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**ABSTRACT:** Abstract This report aimed to describe an academic experience on the daily routine of cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy as part of an extension project in a university hospital. The project was conducted from March 2015 to February 2016, and involved in average 20 participants per activity performed. It was found that patients and professionals face great challenges, such as getting relevant knowledge about the function of cancer therapy to allow the active participation of patients and their families during systematization of patient care. We believe that early interaction of health education professionals in the field of oncology with cancer patients is a valuable tool for the development and specialization in oncology care in chemotherapy.

**DESCRIPTORS:** Chemotherapy; Oncology nursing; Care; Cancer; Permanent Education.

### REPERCUSSÃO DA QUIMIOTERAPIA NO COMBATE AO CÂNCER: A EXPERIÊNCIA DE UM GRUPO AMAZÔNICO

**RESUMO:** O objetivo deste relato foi descrever a experiência acadêmica adquirida sobre o cotidiano do paciente oncológico em quimioterapia, construído junto a um projeto extensionista em um hospital universitário, compreendido entre março de 2015 e fevereiro de 2016, contendo um contingente em média de 20 participantes por atividade desenvolvida. Apontamos que os pacientes e profissionais enfrentam grandes desafios, como o conhecimento sobre a função da terapêutica da forma relevante que permita a participação ativa do paciente e família durante a sistematização dos cuidados ao paciente. Acreditamos que a aproximação prévia dos acadêmicos com os pacientes constitui-se em um instrumento que viabiliza o aperfeiçoamento e especialização em cuidados oncológicos em quimioterapia..

**DESCRIPTORES:** Quimioterapia; Enfermagem oncológica; Cuidado; Câncer; Educação continuada.

### EFFECTOS DE LA QUIMIOTERAPIA EN PACIENTES CON CÁNCER: EXPERIENCIA ACADÉMICA DE GRUPO EN REGIÓN AMAZÓNICA

**RESUMEN:** Se objetivó describir una experiencia académica sobre rutina diaria de pacientes con cáncer sometidos a quimioterapia, como parte de un proyecto de extensión de hospital universitario. Se llevó a cabo de marzo de 2015 a febrero de 2016. Contó con un promedio de 20 participantes por actividad. Se encontró que pacientes y profesionales enfrentan grandes desafíos, como conocimiento de la función de la terapia del cáncer que permite participación activa de los pacientes y familias durante la sistematización de la atención al paciente. Creemos que la interacción temprana de los profesionales de la educación en salud en el área oncológica con los pacientes de cáncer constituye una valiosa herramienta para el desarrollo y especialización en atención oncológica en quimioterapia.

**DESCRIPTORES:** Quimioterapia; Enfermería Oncológica; Cuidados, Câncer; Educación Permanente.

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## ● INTRODUCTION

Cancer is a genetic disorder that results from mutation within healthy cells that chronically impairs tissues, organs, or, most often, entire systems, and has the ability to spread to other sites of the body, causing metastasis <sup>(1)</sup>.

Epidemiologically, about 12.4 million people develop the disease every year worldwide, and 7.6 million die every year from complications related to cancer staging. In Brazil, according to an estimate of 2015, also valid for 2016, approximately 596,000 new cases were recorded, and the Northern region alone accounted for 21,490 of these cases <sup>(1)</sup>.

In addition to the statistics about incidence and prevalence, the social impact of cancer on the lives of patients were investigated. It was found that the disease is greatly feared, causing feelings associated with pain, fear and traumatic reaction, disorder, catastrophe, punishment and fatality, either by loss of functional autonomy or death <sup>(2)</sup>.

Regarding cancer treatment, chemotherapy ensures greater patient survival, thanks to its alkylating agents, cyclophosphamide, cisplatin and carboplatin, platinum analogues, anti-metabolic drugs, alkaloids and inhibitors of topoisomerase to delay cancer progress. However, the main complications caused by this treatment concern its significant impact on patient's identity, particularly the social identity. This impact changes the family dynamics and social relations, because patients in chemotherapy treatment are often compelled to abandon their daily activities and withdraw from social relations <sup>(3)</sup>.

We tend to perceive nursing care in chemotherapy as the assistance provided to patients aimed to mitigate possible adverse events during the chemotherapy cycles. However, the care provided by these professionals also concerns subjective aspects of the patients <sup>(4)</sup>.

Nurses play a key role in the search for comprehensive care to patients. They must be able to recognize and respond to the clinical signs of the patients, based on a care philosophy targeted to the individual needs of the patient <sup>(5)</sup>.

The present study aimed to describe an academic experience on the daily routine of cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy as part of an extension project in a university hospital in the Amazon. The extension project was conducted in that hospital because it provides chemotherapy treatment to the most prevalent cancers in the Northern region of the country.

## ● METHOD

The project consists in an academic experience report that integrates an extension project, involving cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy. The project was funded by *Pró-Reitoria de Extensão of Universidade Federal do Pará*. Rounds of conversation, delivery of informative materials and therapeutic listening were some activities developed with the cancer patients.

The activities were performed in two sites: at the waiting hall where the patients awaited their medical appointments and in the chemotherapy unit: of the High Complexity Care Units (UNACON) of a University Hospital in the Brazilian state of Pará, which has been considered a reference center in the treatment of cancer in the Amazon region since its inauguration.

The university extension program entitled "O cotidiano do paciente em quimioterapia" (the daily routine of patients undergoing chemotherapy) attempted to associate academic knowledge with social aspects. Its purpose was to obtain knowledge on the daily activities of these patients to provide clarification on chemotherapy treatment and care, based on health education and humanized care.

The project, carried out from March 2015 to February 2016, involved cancer patients in the outpatient waiting room undergoing chemotherapy in the chemotherapy unit. In average, 20 patients participated in each activity performed, depending on the number of daily appointments.

The participants were randomly allocated to the project, regardless of age, gender and type of

cancer. Small rounds were organized to promote an atmosphere of trust where patients would feel more comfortable to share their feelings and knowledge about the chemotherapy treatment they are undergoing.

The weekly meeting with patients in rounds of conversation was like a laboratory of information. This environment where the patients shared information related to cancer, also favored discussions on themes related to fears, impulses, care techniques, cultures and hopes experienced by the participants during these group activities. During these rounds of conversation the patients identified taboos related to the stigma surrounding cancer and chemotherapy treatment.

The present study was conducted in the chemotherapy clinic of a reference cancer treatment hospital in the Metropolitan Region of Belém do Pará that provides treatment to cancer. The research topic was "Social representation of family caregivers on communication used in the care of terminal cancer patients." This report was assessed by the Research Ethics Committee of Institute of Health of Instituto de Ciências da Saúde of the University of Pará- ICS/UFGPA, under statement no. 1,442,346.

## ● DISCUSSION

The grief experienced by cancer patients when they were informed about their diagnosis and their fears and trouble accepting the fact have been shared in the group. Some reports about cancer were considered difficult to explain. However, most patients who were informed of their diagnosis and learned their real chances of survival adhered entirely to the treatment to improve their quality of life<sup>(6)</sup>.

We learned from these patients that during chemotherapy they feel sometimes physical and mental distress and that they use many strategies to cope with disease and live their lives, such as relying on their religious faith and participation in other activities such as dance, handcraft, among others<sup>(6)</sup>.

Observation of the effects of chemotherapy treatment in the patients' routine, humanized process of listening associated to chemotherapy, made the treatment less traumatic, reducing the suffering experienced by the patients. Also, responsible listening made it possible to assimilate these experiences reported by the patients during group meetings and conversations<sup>(7)</sup>.

The group dynamics favored the establishment of relationships between the patients and between the patients and the participants of the extension project, and individuals who usually refrained from participating in such activities felt more confident to share their experiences after some of these meetings<sup>(8)</sup>.

Corroborating some literature reports, we noticed that cancer patients are not willing to talk about their fears, and caregivers do not ask them about these fears. Therefore, they are unable to perceive sleep disorders, lack of appetite, hair loss, loss of energy, fatigue and pain as factors that interfere with self-care. This attitude contributes to reduce treatment adherence, worsening prognosis<sup>(8)</sup>.

Cancer is a very stigmatizing disease, and patients undergoing chemotherapy face distress and many changes in their daily lives, with emphasis to biopsychic alterations, which cause significant impact, generating increased anxiety and depression, as well as those related to the side effects of treatment<sup>(9)</sup>.

For oncology students, the extension program can be considered a hospital laboratory where knowledge is jointly constructed with the professors, mentors, tutors and the community of users of the system. This community has a consensus knowledge based on their daily practices, grounded in the local culture that influences the way in which the individuals cope with the complications of chemotherapy<sup>(6)</sup>.

Addressing cancer and chemotherapy in a project extension is a complex task. However, this type of project provides an excellent opportunity for the improvement and construction of the students' identities in the academic environment because it allows them to reflect on their care practice. This type of activity promotes the contact between the academic environment and the community, reconstructing the role of nurses in nurse's role in ensuring the adherence of cancer patients to the treatment needed, e.g. chemotherapy<sup>(9)</sup>.

In addition to promoting actions targeted to the population, through the improvement of extracurricular activities, the activities of the extension project also aim to obtain the confidence of patients, who are listened at rounds of conversation and support groups of the project. Feelings of guilt and low self-esteem expressed in the rounds of conversation were reported as factors that reduce adherence to treatment and the individuals' willingness to undergo chemotherapy.

The proposal of an extension program in a university hospital is a strategy to address the increasing specialization in health care, particularly in the nursing field.

## ● CONCLUSION

This previous contact of oncology students with patients provides elements for the implementation of academic programs targeted to the improvement and specialization of future oncology professionals in chemotherapy care, preparing them for fieldwork, through internships and experiences, which is consistent with the SUS guidelines concerning the delivery of comprehensive and humanized care.

Listening was one of the best strategies reported, as it contributed to increase the patients' awareness of their health status. Therefore, the extension group significantly contributed to provide moments of exchanges, listening and thinking to the patients.

The activity described in this study contributes to the strengthening and implementation of the National Curriculum Guidelines for Nursing Graduation, promoting the coordination between teaching and health services, favoring the maintenance of health professionals capable of promoting multidisciplinary qualification and coordination of health care throughout the country, raising awareness of and preparing future professionals for better dealing with the different situations faced by patients undergoing chemotherapy.

However, despite its contributions and achievements, this extension project must be improved and enhanced to ensure that the initiative is implemented in various centers for the training of human resources in health care, allowing the insertion of educational and health institutions in the cancer care network, to provide higher level of training to nursing students in the academic setting.

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