Experiences of partners of prostate cancer: A qualitative study

Darren Pinks and Professor Cindy Davis

Abstract

One in two Australian men will be diagnosed with cancer. Prostate cancer, the most common cancer, affects men over 65. Treatment leads to erectile dysfunction, incontinence, decreased libido and gynaecomastia. Despite a 92% survival rate most survivors report a reduced quality of life. Gender identity theory has been found to explain survivors reduced quality of life as masculinity has been identified as a central concern within the treatment of prostate cancer, often superseding the threat of mortality. Diminished masculinity threatens a survivor's identity due to a conflict between their need for support, treatment effects, and social expectations of being a man. Studies indicate interpersonal communication difficulties within relationships coping with prostate cancer. Partners report increased levels of distress as a result of not having a voice, yet little research has explored their experiences and perspectives on prostate cancer survivorship. This research aims to address this gap and ask ‘How do partners experience prostate cancer survivorship?’

Introduction

- Cancer effects 1 in 2 men and 1 in 3 women
- Prostate cancer is the most common cancer
- Over 20000 new cases are diagnosed yearly
- Survival is the most important stage with 92% to 10-year survival rates
- Treatment reduces quality of life and diminishes masculinity (Sharifi et al., 2005)
- Partners are the main source of support, they report more distress than the survivors (Couper et al., 2006)
- A gap exists in understanding the partners experience and perspectives of prostate cancer survivorship.

“I’d rather die than live not being able to get an erection”
Anonymous survivor

Gender Identity Theory

Gender identity theory proposes an individual’s sense of masculinity comes from the social self, influencing man’s attitudes, self-concept and behaviour. Masculinity has been identified as a central concern within the treatment of prostate cancer, often superseding the threat of mortality. Diminished masculinity threatens a survivor’s identity due to a conflict between their need for support, physical effects of treatment, and social expectations of masculinity, causing distress in prostate cancer survivors (Zaider et al., 2012).

“Having needs but I can’t talk about it, it will hurt his feelings”
Anonymous partner

Issues with interpersonal communication

Communication has been shown to be difficult for couples when there is an issue of erectile dysfunction within the relationship (Badr & Taylor, 2009). Studies have found reduced communication between survivors and their partners, during prostate cancer experiences (Song & Zhang, 2012). Despite findings, that partners help survivors cope with diminished masculinity, a gap exists in understanding the partners perspective of survivorship (Wootten et al., 2007).

Project aim

Explore a partner’s experience of prostate cancer survivorship, by seeking to understand their perspective on the effects of treatment on their relationships asking:

‘How do partners experience prostate cancer survivorship?’

Design

- This will be a qualitative study, this is an appropriate way to explore a deeper understanding of partner experiences and give their perspective a voice given the lack of literature on this topic (Braun & Clarke, 2013)
- A focus group method will be used to collect data, this is recommended when discussing sensitive areas like sexual dysfunction, and a method that can reduce the influence of the researcher.

Participants

- Purposive sample of male or female partners who have had a relationship with a prostate cancer survivor.
- Convenient recruitment strategy targeting Bloominghill cancer care centre & Sunshine coast prostate cancer support group members.

Procedure

- Focus groups of 5-8 participants will be facilitated by Darren Pinks supported by a female research assistant.
- Semi-structured discussion guide will be used.
- Discussions will be recorded & transcribed verbatim.
- The saturation method will utilised to help determine total number of groups.

Analysis

- Thematic analysis will be used to identify themes using NVivo software.
- Triangulation between researchers will ensure themes reflect the data.
- Findings will have limited generalisability due to the data being representative of those individual experiences within the given context.

References