



Impact of Social Support on Lives of Chinese Women with Breast Cancer: Commentary on Key Issues

KEYWORDS

social support, breast cancer, women

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ABSTRACT

Breast cancer is the most common illness in women. The incidence of breast cancer in women grows each year. The impact of breast cancer on women can be huge in terms of its the fear of diagnosis and radical treatment, issues of potential change in perception of body image, and relations with spouse and family. Such relations can become impaired and tense. In cases where families hold negative reactions to a diagnosis, women can feel unsupported and alone. In Chinese families, reaction to breast cancer can be negative. Such reactions can leave women feeling tense, worried and unsupported with few social networks available to them. Women with breast cancer need social support systems/ networks that provide guidance, emotional support sympathy, support and the comfort of other women. Social support can also be educational that focuses in the wellbeing of women.

INTRODUCTION

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in women. Globally, women have a one in 8 chance of developing breast cancer. In Europe and the US, the incidence of breast cancer follows a bi-modal distribution; the most common age range in older women is 55 years and older. In younger women, breast cancer is common in women 35 to 44 years of age. The difference in age is thought to relate to possible genetic affiliation caused by an incidence of breast cancer in a first degree relative. In contrast, in older women, breast cancer has been associated with obesity, excessive weight gain post menopause, early age at menstruation, delayed onset of the menopause, infertility, high fat diet and lack of exercise. However, in Southern Asian countries, the age distribution for breast cancer is much wider. In Pakistan, unmarried women as young as 21 years have been known to develop breast cancer (Banning, 2009). Since 2007, there has been a steady rise in the incidence of breast cancer in China particularly in young women. This rise has been associated with the globalisation of China which has led to the increased consumption of "fast food" and a reduced reliance on soy and vegetable products. This has led to an increased rate of obesity particularly in young people. In addition to this, young people are consuming more alcohol and smoking more. These changes in diet and lifestyle may have had an impact on the number of young women developing breast cancer. Correlations have been made with older Chinese women who are more likely to respect and adhere to traditional values and maintain a healthy life style. This revolves around the concept of moderation with respect to food, alcohol intake and exercise.

Women suffering from breast cancer can be exposed to a range of emotions that relate to their ability to cope with the extreme stress of having a life changing illness. For many women, the shock of diagnosis and the reality of the need for often complex treatment may or may involve surgery, radiotherapy and potential follow up with adjuvant therapy support can be associated with feelings of anxiety, stress and depression. Pressure to make choices regarding treatment can be challenging for women. The reality of losing one's breast can be frightening for women who have to deal with the realities of invasive surgery to reduce the possible spread of cancer versus impaired self-image, fear of loss of significant a relationship or life part-

ner. As a result women have to contend with the feasibility of changes to self-image, the fear of loss of femininity due to possible mastectomy, worry related to surgical outcome, plus possible loss of income related to the need to re-adjust their work-life balance, plus the impact on partnerships, as well as feelings of insecurity due to fears related to impending change. Such changes can be difficult to come to terms with, so the need for close and supportive networks is vital.

In Chinese communities, breast cancer is not openly discussed with non-family members as cancer is a taboo subject that subject that may be considered as an illness that brings shame to the family due perceptions of bad luck. For this reason, Chinese women with breast cancer may conceal their illness rather than revealing it to family members. Breast cancer can also impact on family, both relationships with children and wider family relations. For women living with breast cancer, the fear of the future, issues related to longevity, and cancer recurrence are often viewed with trepidation. In addition to this, women often have to manage cultural issues which may impact on attitude to breast cancer. This is a salient issue for Chinese women who may be reluctant to undergo breast cancer screening due to possible conceptions that body imaging is a waste of time, and its outcome may be irrelevant to them. In addition to this is the emotional upset, fear of outcome of screening, plus the emotional upheaval for the women involved their families (Banning et al, 2009). For many women there is also a need to comply with post-surgery drug regimens such as adjuvant therapy prescribed for periods five years. The intention of this therapy is to prevent secondary cancer growth. Unfortunately, such regimes have a side effect profile that can impact on adherence with medication irrespective of the need to maintain drug therapy.

Social support is an important and essential component of the support system that is required for women who develop breast cancer (Kim et al., 2010). Women who develop breast cancer are exposed to a plethora of emotions that involve not only the denial of diagnosis but also, fear, trepidation, of possible surgery, feasible change in body image, fear of losing a breast and its impact on feelings of femininity, future pregnancies, breast feeding and impact on spouse and related relationships. In such cases,

the need for social support is important (Lam et al., 2011). Women need other women to confide upon to reduce or, allay their fears, provide information and education to support them emotionally through the illness trajectory.

More specifically, Huang, and Hsu (2013) foster the view that social support can have a positive impact on depressive symptoms related to, or occurring as a consequence of breast cancer and its treatment. In support of this, the mediation hypothesis (Kim 2010) poses the view that the provision of social support can improve the quality of life of women by alleviating the symptoms of depression, buffer the impact and reactions to diagnosis, improve overall well-being and contribute to the recovery of women (Kim et al., 2010). The benefit of, and need for social support for women recovering from breast cancer is also illustrated by shorter survival times and poorer health outcomes for women who experience inadequate social support post diagnosis and suffer from depressive symptoms (Huang & Hsu, 2013).

For Chinese women there is a need for tailored information that meets their needs both culturally and linguistically (Kwok, 2014). In addition, there is a need for families to also support women through the illness trajectory particularly during the initial phase when the shock of diagnosis is at its greatest and women need support from families and close relatives to assist them to make decisions regarding their treatment. At this stage many women suffer from the shock of diagnosis, overload of information, as well the impact of cultural attitudes towards breast cancer (Kwok, 2011). Chinese belief systems focus on the concepts of Taoism and Confucianism (Kwok, 2011). These cultural influences can have an inherent impact on the attitude of women towards health-related screening and its uptake as, well as sharing possible views regarding shock of diagnosis. In addition, Chinese women also have to deal with the emotional impact, and significance of the family reaction to their illness, particularly possible feelings of "bad luck" and negative reaction, or possible rejection by spouse and family. In these circumstances, families may also react negatively to treatment and screening. This may leave women feeling vulnerable to the reactions of families and spouses. The family reaction can leave women feeling isolated, having fears related to the impact of a diagnosis of breast cancer on their health (Banning & Shia, 2013). In such cases, women need emotional support from friends, family, medical and nursing professionals. Such support can be invaluable and impact positively on the lives of women. So women should be encouraged to seek social support as a means to assist their recovery.

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