Cancer and Quality of Life: Palliative Care

Too few people seek help in easing side effects during and after cancer treatment.

March 14, 2019 By Jennifer L. Cook

People with cancer make difficult personal treatment decisions every day, weighing the risks and side effects of new treatments against the possible benefits. The ultimate solution is more patient-centered research to find effective treatments with fewer side effects—as well as more effective therapies to manage those side effects.

But one way to directly address side effects now, especially for people with incurable cancer, is to broach the topic of palliative care earlier in the process—preferably at diagnosis, advocates suggest.

Palliative care is often misunderstood. Many people these days are living with cancer that can be controlled but not cured—they have a chronic disease and need help managing it. Palliative care is about minimizing cancer symptoms and the negative effects of treatment at any stage of disease. Studies show that getting palliative cancer care early means better relief of symptoms such as pain and improvements in mood and life satisfaction—as well as access to more resources. Some studies find that early access even improves survival.

Amy Berman, a staunch supporter of palliative care, is a living example of its value, having thrived for eight and a half years with incurable metastatic breast cancer with the help of a palliative care team. Whether someone has a terminal or curable disease, palliative care helps that person live the best possible life, says Berman, a nurse who works for the John A. Hartford Foundation. In testimony to Congress in 2016, she noted that palliative care "is the best friend of the seriously ill" and lobbied for more funding for training and research—at the time, the latter commanded just 0.4 percent of the National Institutes of Health budget.

Challenges abound in the fight to improve the quality of life for people being treated for cancer and for survivors. But you can stand up for yourself right now in a number of ways.

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