MEDIA RELEASE

Urgent action needed to treat depression in cancer patients

The Australian College of Mental Health Nurses and the Australian Nursing Federation are concerned that systematic failures are leading to a lack of depression diagnosis for women with breast cancer.

Cancer is up to 25% more lethal when the patient also suffers from depression.

ANF assistant federal secretary Yvonne Chaperon said patients with cancer continue to slip through the net in terms of mental health care. “These patients are in constant contact with health professionals so this is totally an unnecessary gap in the system,” she said.

“Depression jeopardises recovery,” said breast cancer survivor and CEO of the Australian College of Mental Health Nurses, Kim Ryan. “Cancer patients require optimum mental health in order to improve their physical health and recover faster.”

“However in many cases patients are left to experience both the pain of physical and mental illness.”

On Pink Ribbon Day, nurses urge an increase in awareness and action to help women diagnosed with breast cancer who are also experiencing depression. Furthermore nurses urge these patients to talk about, and seek help for, their emotional distress.

Depression is a disabling illness that affects about 15% to 25% of cancer patients. Death rates are a staggering 25% higher in cancer patients who experience depression and 39% higher in cancer patients who received a diagnosis of depression.

ANF assistant federal secretary Yvonne Chaperon said it is alarming that some breast cancer patients suffering a mental illness only had their physical condition cared for while debilitation depression and anxiety often went untreated. “We need a holistic approach to healthcare. As it stands families of patients are often left to fill the gap. They feel helpless as their loved one experiences depression while also trying to cope with their physical illness.”
Ms Chaperon said this lapse was unnecessary as nurses could provide that care. “Nurses are the back bone of the health system and are uniquely placed to intervene and, if necessary, refer that patient on.”

Ms Ryan said that all nurses need to have the skills to identify mental health issues in their patients.

‘I was lucky that I had access to emotional support from family and friends as well as professional support from my fellow mental health nurses. We must make certain that no one is left to slip through the system without adequate care,’ Ms Ryan said.

“Better training and education will ensure that nurses have the skills to recognise the symptoms of depression and other common mental health issues and assist with treatment and referral,” Ms Chaperon said.

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