

NSHRF PROJECT FACT SHEET

Individualized Telephone Counselling Intervention for People with Cancer

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Telephone counseling provided by a registered nurse can play an important role in the fight against cancer in Nova Scotia. Recent research shows problem solving counseling by a registered nurse on a telephone can help cancer patients cope better with their disease and at the same time reduce health costs.

The emotional impact of a cancer diagnosis can be as devastating as the physical effects and the depression that often results affects how a person deals with their illness. Telephone counseling by nurses can help people adjust to and better cope with the situation. Participants in a Nova Scotia study led by Dr. Barbara Downe-Wamboldt and Dr. Lorna Butler of Dalhousie University's School of Nursing said such counseling was extremely helpful to them by providing support, someone to listen to them, and a sense of empathy and understanding. The randomized, controlled study revealed those in the control group without access to telephone counseling became more depressed over a one-year period, whereas the study group with access to telephone counseling did not.

Dr. Downe-Wamboldt and Dr Butler led a team to determine the effectiveness of individualized, problem-solving counseling provided by registered nurses over the telephone for people with breast, lung or prostate cancer living in urban and rural communities in Nova Scotia. Twenty-eight percent of the group studied showed poor to fair adjustment to illness. Patients' main concerns included the physical impact of their illness and/or its treatment, emotional responses, stress related to symptoms, work, perceived causes of their cancer, relations with family and friends, and seeking or communicating information related to their illness. The protective effect of telephone counseling did not increase the overall cost of providing health care.

The researchers say telephone counseling by nurses could also save the health care system money. It is more expensive to treat patients with poor or fair adjustments than it is to treat someone who has adjusted well, and poor adjustments were related to depression and evasive coping. Their year-long study found clinically important differences in depression scores between the experimental and control groups.

It costs Nova Scotia about \$28,000 a year to treat a person who has adjusted well to their diagnosis and about \$48,000 for someone who has adjusted poorly. Dr. Downe-Wamboldt said, "Moving people from fair adjustment to good adjustment has the

potential to save approximately \$20,000 per person per year. Improving the capacity of only three patients with cancer to live with their illness with less distress and less interference in their lives could generate \$60,000 in one year in savings.”

Telephone counseling is also a cost-effective way of reaching rural residents with cancer who have less ready access to counseling and health services. Further research is needed to determine what types of people benefit more than others from telephone counseling.

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