

Study shows varying support needs of cancer patients

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Organizations offering peer support services to people with cancer should be aware of the varying needs of patients, according to a new study.

Talking to other people who also have or have had [cancer](#) can help patients, University of Aberdeen researchers have found.

However some cancer patients shy away from those with similar experiences in order to protect their own or other patients' emotional well-being.

Dr. Zoë Skea and Dr. Sara MacLennan from the University's Academic Urology Unit examined issues relating to 'mutual helping' on behalf of Aberdeen-based cancer charity UCAN.

The charity was launched to raise awareness and improve the support and quality of life for people and families affected by the five urological cancers - prostate, bladder, kidney, testicular and penile.

UCAN has a urological cancer care centre within Aberdeen Royal Infirmary which offers a range of support services such as introducing new patients to more experienced patient 'buddy' advisors.

Twenty six men and women with a urological cancer were interviewed for the study which examined the experiences of those who had and had not used the UCAN center and services.

Dr. Zoë Skea, Research Fellow, who is also part of the University's Health Services Research Unit led the study, said: "We examined views on various forms of peer support among people with urological cancer.

"A majority valued hearing about other people's experiences of cancer as well as being able to share their own stories or offer advice, although not all felt they need to take part in specially facilitated peer support.

"A minority had chosen to avoid communicating with other people — especially those who had a better or worse prognosis than their own.

"Our study is one of only a few that has explored views about peer support among people who used facilitated peer support as well as those who have chosen not to.

"Our investigation showed that peer support can help with understanding and empathy as well as reducing feelings of isolation. Talking to others can also alleviate worries and give hope as well as being a way of sharing practical tips and advice.

"Some people who didn't use organised peer services didn't feel a need to because they were getting support elsewhere or because they thought the severity of their cancer or treatment didn't warrant it. Some had adjusted and were coping well enough with having cancer.

Dr. MacLennan, Senior Lecturer within the University's Academic Urology Unit and Director of Operations at UCAN, added:

"Organizations interested in developing and promoting peer support services should bear in mind that patients' desire to engage may be variable and dependent on a range of factors.

"Services need to be sensitive to the reasons that can make it more and less helpful to different people."

Study findings are informing the design and delivery of a [peer support](#) service — the ‘buddy network’ — which is offered by UCAN.

Professor James N’Dow from UCAN and Chair of Surgery at the University of Aberdeen added: “High quality UCAN Charity funded research has resulted in better understanding of the support needs of our urological [cancer patients](#) and their families.

“This has led to transformational changes in cancer care that the urology services now provide in Aberdeen Royal Infirmary through the UCAN Center.”

More information: The study Enabling mutual helping? Examining variable needs for facilitated peer support appears in the journal *Patient Education and Counselling*.

Provided by University of Aberdeen

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