



Association of VA Psychologist Leaders

Essential Healthcare for Veterans: Psychologists Improve Lives

CANCER: THE MOST FEARED OF DISEASES

Cancer is the second most common cause of death in the United States after heart disease. It is estimated that, ultimately, one out of every four Americans will die of cancer.¹

- ◆ Since 1990, 12 million Americans have been diagnosed with cancer and 5 million have died.¹
- ◆ Approximately 50,000 new cases of cancer occur in VA patients each year.²
- ◆ In FY 1998, the last time full reporting was complete, new cases of cancer in the VA accounted for nearly 10% of total unique patients accessing the VA for medical care in that year.³

The diagnosis of cancer often brings out fears unmatched by those elicited by other catastrophic illnesses. The effects are felt by patients, families and caregivers.⁴ Unfortunately, the psychological aspects of the diagnosis are often ignored and there is a lack of consistent psychosocial supports for patients with cancer.⁵

Cancer patients experience a variety of psychological symptoms including depression, stress and anxiety. Psychological interventions such as individual or group psychotherapy, family therapy, biofeedback, and pain management can significantly improve the quality of life for both patients and their families.⁶ Psychologists can help patients make important decisions regarding treatment options, teach appropriate coping strategies, and intervene in issues around noncompliance.

On a more positive note, an estimated 80% of all cancers could be prevented if people practiced healthier behaviors such as not smoking, good eating habits and exercise.⁷

Behavior change, a field in which psychologists have unique expertise, is one of the major weapons in the reduction of premature disease and deaths due to cancer. Psychologists are at the forefront in this field and behavioral research in this area is one of the top priorities for the National Cancer Institute.¹

See other side.

The Cartesian worldview separating mental and physical health is no longer suitable in healthcare today. Psychology is an important partner in the fight against this deadly disease and able to make vital contributions to the VA's National Cancer Strategy through research and intervention.

¹ McGuire, P.A. (1999). Psychology and medicine connecting in war on cancer. *APA Monitor*, 30, 8-9.

² <http://www.va.gov/cancer>

³ http://www.va.gov/cancer/docs/Cancer_Incidence_in_the_VA.doc

⁴ Jerse, M.A., Whitman, H.H. & Gustafson, J.P. (1984) *Helping patients and their families cope with medical problems*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

⁵ Rabasca, L. (1999). Psychosocial support is lacking for cancer patients, finds IOM report. *APA Monitor*, 30, 10.

⁶ Azar, B. (1999). Psychotherapy is proven to boost quality of life. *APA Monitor*, 30, 14.

⁷ Azar, B. (1999). Tailored interventions prove more effective. *APA Monitor*, 30, 38.