

The Supportive Management of Depression and Anxiety in Ovarian Cancer Patients Experiencing a First Recurrence: A Qualitative Investigation

Background: Ovarian cancer is the fifth most common cancer in the UK. It is often diagnosed at an advanced stage with over 70% of women experiencing a recurrence. Patients experience high levels of depression and anxiety. Guidelines suggest that the management of psychological illness is a priority but no specific psychological support is available. We aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of perceived causes of distress for ovarian cancer patients and what individually targeted support they feel would improve their quality of life.

Method: Qualitative semi-structured telephone interviews were carried out with 19 women with recurrent ovarian cancer. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis.

Results: Three main themes were identified: experience of initial and recurrence diagnosis, psychological impact and support needs. Most women found the diagnosis to be a lengthy process, reported a more negative response to recurrence than initial diagnosis, and reported a number of side effects as a result of treatment. The diagnosis had a significant impact on their lives and their families, partly due to fear about the future, though most tried to remain positive. Women sought and desired support, would like a group support intervention, and felt that online communities were helpful.

Conclusion: Women with recurrent ovarian cancer experience significant levels of psychological distress due to diagnostic delays, treatment side effects, fear of the future, and the overall impact of the disease. To manage distress, they would welcome support interventions, including contact with other women with the disease.