Cancer support groups: a critical review of empirical studies

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CRD summary
This review evaluated the efficacy of support groups for adults affected by cancer and assessed the level of consumer satisfaction. The authors concluded that high levels of satisfaction were expressed for support groups whose efficacy appears supported by an improvement in morale and quality of life. The review had some methodological weaknesses and the conclusions need to be viewed with caution.

Authors' objectives
To evaluate the efficacy of support groups for adults affected by cancer and to assess the level of consumer satisfaction.

Searching
MEDLINE, the Cochrane Library, Cancerlit, CINAHL and PsycINFO were searched from 1975; the search terms were reported. Only studies reported in the English language were considered for the review. The bibliographies of retrieved papers and review articles were checked for additional studies.

Study selection
Study designs of evaluations included in the review
The criteria for study design were not explicitly stated. Randomised controlled trials were used to assess efficacy or effectiveness, while descriptive, cross-sectional, non-experimental studies were used to derive information about group composition and characteristics, programming, consumer views, and interactions between characteristics of members and group outcomes.

Specific interventions included in the review
Studies of professionally-led, face-to-face cancer support groups were eligible for inclusion. Support included a planned activity with face-to-face sharing of experiences and mutual support among the participants. The type of intervention varied across the included studies; details were reported in the paper.

Participants included in the review
Studies of adults affected by cancer were eligible. The included studies considered a range of cancer types, stages, cancer treatments and time since diagnosis. Patients took part in support groups either alone or with their partners; studies of close associates or care givers alone were not eligible for inclusion.

Outcomes assessed in the review
There were no outcome-based inclusion criteria. Three main categories of outcome were considered: consumer satisfaction, process evaluation and outcome evaluation. Consumer satisfaction referred to measures used to assess the value and quality of a programme. Process evaluation included the description and monitoring of the programme and the programme's compliance with a set of standards. Various measurement tools were considered for outcome evaluation, although the majority of studies evaluated knowledge of the disease, psychosocial or physical functioning, quality of life and general satisfaction with the intervention.

How were decisions on the relevance of primary studies made?
The authors did not state how the papers were selected for the review, or how many reviewers performed the selection.

Assessment of study quality
The authors did not state that they assessed study quality.

Data extraction
The authors did not state how the data were extracted for the review, or how many reviewers performed the data extraction.
Methods of synthesis
How were the studies combined?
The studies were described in a narrative.

How were differences between studies investigated?
Differences in study participants, study design, outcomes and interventions were discussed in the text and presented in a table.

Results of the review
Forty-four studies were included in the review, but only 41 (42 papers) appear to be in the tables of results.

Consumer satisfaction (10 studies).
Most of the studies reported that participants were satisfied with the experience of the support group and felt less isolated, better understood, or more hopeful in their disease. The participants, especially those staying until the end of the study, reported high levels of satisfaction with their experience, would have recommended the group to others, and liked the group to continue. The emotional support, along with the experiential and expert knowledge gained, were felt by the participants as the most useful aspects of the group experience.

Process evaluation (2 studies, although it is not clear whether the conclusions were derived from more papers).
One study suggested that focusing the intervention on a few aspects, such as creating a group culture or focusing on the illness itself, could result in better quality-of-life outcomes. Participants in the support group tended to be middle class women using health and human services extensively.

Outcome evaluation (32 studies, 23 randomised clinical trials).
The majority of studies reported some kind of psychosocial improvement. The benefits could include, for instance, a reduction in tension, anxiety or depression, fewer sexual problems, greater satisfaction related to work performance, social activities, or physical appearance. One study showed a significant improvement in survival. Groups lasting more than 6 months seemed the most effective.

Authors' conclusions
There are high levels of consumer satisfaction, and the outcome evaluations substantiate the effectiveness of support groups.

CRD commentary
This review addressed a well-defined question in terms of the intervention and study participants, whilst inclusion criteria were not specified for the study outcomes and study design. Several databases and a trials register were searched, and efforts made to find additional studies. Only studies reported in English were included, therefore language bias cannot be ruled out. The potential for publication bias was not evaluated in the report. It is unclear whether critical phases of the review process were conducted in duplicate, which might have introduced reviewer error and bias. The inclusion of many relatively small and clinically heterogeneous studies represents a major limitation of the evidence available for this review and might limit the generalisability of the conclusions. The authors discussed the limitations of the data at length and noted a number of caveats to their findings. The conclusions have to be viewed with caution given the potential methodological and reporting weaknesses of the review.

Implications of the review for practice and research
Practice: The authors concluded that support groups should be marketed to the broadest audience possible.

Research: The authors suggested that more community trials should be conducted by a broad range of public health facilities, to train existing personnel to deliver treatment protocols tailored to local circumstances and populations, since most studies included women with breast cancer. The authors concluded that further studies are needed to evaluate the efficacy of support groups for various cancer sites and stages, and to monitor the potential unintended consequences of...
support, since current evidence appears largely based on studies conducted under highly optimised conditions.

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