A review of peer support in the context of cancer
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CRD summary
This review assessed peer support interventions for patients with cancer. The authors concluded that there is a lack of research and further, more appropriately designed research is required. This was a poorly reported review. However, there appears to be support for the authors’ conclusion about the lack of research.

Authors' objectives
To assess peer support interventions for patients with cancer or their carers.

Searching
MEDLINE, PsycINFO, Sociological Abstracts, Social Work Abstracts, Social Science Abstracts, APAIS-Health and CINAHL were searched from 1990 to March 2001 using the reported search terms.

Study selection
Study designs of evaluations included in the review
Both qualitative and quantitative evaluations were eligible. Further inclusion criteria for the study design were not defined.

Specific interventions included in the review
Studies of interventions aimed principally at providing peer support, defined as emotional support based on shared personal experience, were eligible. The included studies examined the following types of peer support interventions: professionally supervised dyadic, face-to-face setting; professionally supervised group, face-to-face setting; professionally supervised group, remote setting; peer-supervised group, face-to-face setting; and peer-supervised group, remote setting.

Participants included in the review
Studies of patients with cancer were eligible. Studies of men, women, children and adolescents with various types of cancer were included in the review.

Outcomes assessed in the review
The outcomes were not pre-specified. The included studies assessed patient satisfaction, helpfulness of the intervention, acceptability, physical functioning, ability to cope and psychological distress.

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

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

Data extraction
The authors did not state how the data were extracted for the review, or how many reviewers performed the data extraction. Data on study design, intervention and outcomes were extracted.

Methods of synthesis
How were the studies combined?
A narrative synthesis of the studies was undertaken.

How were differences between studies investigated?
Differences between definitions of peer support were explored briefly within the report.

**Results of the review**
Twenty-four studies were included (n greater than 2,317): 1 randomised controlled trial (n=312), 1 experimental study (n=40), 5 post-test studies (n=332), 2 case comparison studies (n=656) and 15 descriptive studies (n greater than 977).

Overall, the studies suggested that peer support provided emotional support and information to the patients.

Two studies suggested that peer support provided in group settings was not always beneficial.

**Authors’ conclusions**
Peer support interventions for patients with cancer may work by providing emotional support and information from people who have shared the experience. There was a lack of research and further, more appropriately designed research is required.

**CRD commentary**
The review question was clear in terms of the intervention and participants, but was undefined for study design and outcomes. Several relevant sources were searched, but it was unclear whether unpublished studies were eligible or if any language restrictions were applied. The methods used to select studies and extract the data were not described, so it is not known whether any efforts were made to reduce reviewer errors and bias. Study validity was not assessed, so the reliability of data derived from the included studies could not be fully assessed.

There were insufficient details on the included studies. In particular, full and adequate results were not provided so the accuracy of the summary in the text of the review could not be verified. This was a poorly reported review with no description of review methods, no validity assessment, and inadequate information about individual studies and how these were data extracted and synthesised. However, the evidence presented tends to support the authors’ conclusion about the lack of research and justifies the recommendation for further research.

**Implications of the review for practice and research**
Practice: The authors did not state any implications for practice.

Research: The authors stated that there is a need for future research and a need to develop research methods suitable for evaluating naturalistic, community-based peer support interventions.

**Bibliographic details**

**Indexing Status**
Subject indexing assigned by CRD

**MeSH**
Neoplasms /psychology /therapy; Peer Group; Self-Help Groups; Social Support

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Record Status
This is a critical abstract of a systematic review that meets the criteria for inclusion on DARE. Each critical abstract contains a brief summary of the review methods, results and conclusions followed by a detailed critical assessment on the reliability of the review and the conclusions drawn.