

Poster Session I
#19

Screening for Cancer-Related Distress Using the NCCN® Distress Thermometer: A Literature Review

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Purpose: To describe how the NCCN® Distress Thermometer (DT) has been used in patient care research and make recommendations for its expanded use in oncology nursing studies.

Theoretical Framework: Andersen et al. (1994) biobehavioral model of cancer stress and disease course.

Methods: Computerized literature search of online databases of the NCCN, NCI, NIH, IOM websites, and PubMed, CINAHL, PsychINFO, and Google Scholar from 1998-2010. Studies that reported on the psychometric properties and/or clinical use of NCCN® Distress Thermometer were included.

Results: Twenty-five validation studies and nineteen clinical studies reported on the use of the DT. Utilized in a variety of cancer settings, the DT has demonstrated comparable psychometric features as well –standardized, detailed questionnaires. Utilizing a DT cutoff score of > 4, 28-88% of patients reported clinically significant distress. Being female, young or having a brain tumor was associated with higher scores. Most reports were limited to Caucasian populations; only one study described the use of the DT with African American prostate cancer patients. Two studies conducted by nurse researchers implementing the DT were identified. The DT has not been tested in the pediatric population. The majority of studies have focused on distress screening during the treatment phase of the cancer trajectory.

Conclusions and Implications: Although not recommended for use in isolation, the NCCN® Distress Thermometer (DT) is an accurate screening tool for detecting the presence of heightened psychosocial distress. Despite recommendations by the NCCN, the Distress Thermometer has seldom been used in nursing research. Potential areas for future research include psychosocial stress reduction programs throughout the cancer trajectory, assessment of collaborative practice models for oncology psychosocial services, and examination of the cancer experience of understudied groups, such as Latinas and African Americans, low literacy populations and patient caregivers.