

## **A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PILOT STUDY: HOW ONCOLOGY NURSES ASSESS SEXUALITY IN PRACTICE**

JoAnn Mick, RN, MSN, MBA

The University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center & Texas Woman's University  
1515 Holcombe Blvd. Box 82, Houston, Texas 77030  
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**Purpose:** Nurses often do not offer specific teaching, supporting and counseling interventions to manage the effects of cancer and cancer treatment on sexuality. Although identified as an important area of nursing practice, assessment of sexuality is often overlooked, neglected, or avoided. The specific aim of this research is to describe how oncology nurses assess sexuality in clinical practice.

**Method:** A pilot study utilizing phenomenological methods was conducted to obtain an in-depth understanding of oncology nurses' practice of performing sexuality assessments. Two oncology registered nurses employed at a southwestern tertiary acute care specialty hospital were recruited to participate in tape-recorded interviews. An interview guide was used to obtain descriptions of their sexuality assessments. The tapes were transcribed verbatim and data were analyzed to identify common themes.

**Findings:** A 34-year old male nurse and a 49-year old female nurse were interviewed. Both nurses had 9 years of practice experience and both were from the Philippines. Data analysis identified ten themes: Form-dependent practice, Topic blockade, Unfounded fears, Concept insufficiency, Ungrounded transference, Gesture-reactive care, Unquestioned assumptions, Shunned Significance, Knowledge nonchalance and Inspired practice-modification. Study findings identified the need for creation of an assessment form designed to meet standards of care and standards of professional performance regarding sexuality. Education needs were identified to promote nurse-patient relationships that welcome questions, increase understanding of how one's world-view impacts practice and explore, in-depth, the meaning of sexuality. Revising the interview guide to add a question about the study participant's definition of sexuality would improve the interviewer's understanding of their responses.

**Discussion:** With additional interviews, the initial themes can be reduced in number to allow identification of sub-themes as data are saturated. Clearer understanding of nursing practice can assist with development of education strategies to promote effective sexuality assessment skills and increase comfort with sexuality assessment. Further research is needed to investigate nursing assessment of sexuality. Potential future uses of the research may include: development of instruments for future quantitative studies, and translation of the findings into theoretical frameworks and interventions to improve oncology nurses' sexuality assessments.