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Gender & Quality of Relationship Matters

BY JO CAVALLO

Thirty-nine percent of caregivers are men, according to “Caregiving in the U.S.,” a 2004 study by the National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP. That’s up from 25 percent in 1987 and 28 percent in 1997.

Although no statistics currently indicate how many men are caregivers for cancer patients, a study co-authored by Youngmee Kim, PhD, of the American Cancer Society, concludes the trend may be the same in cancer caregiving.

Kim’s study found that women often report feeling greater burden and less self-esteem than male caregivers because they’re expected to be the family caregivers and usually don’t seek out additional help when caring for a sick loved one.

But another study by Kim recently published in *Psycho-Oncology* found that in spousal caregiving situations, both gender and how well the caregiver relates to the cancer patient dictate the level of stress and burden experienced by the caregiver and can affect how well care is provided.

The study found “gender role plays a significant role in caregivers’ provision of certain types of care to their spouse with cancer.” Male caregivers often deal better with physical rather than psychosocial support, whereas the opposite may be true for women. “Say the wife gets breast cancer and she’s 70 years old, even though the husband is right there, he’s not trained or socialized as a caregiver,” says Kim.

Plus, in cancer caregiving, unlike in Alzheimer’s disease where deteriorating cognitive function requires the caregiver to be around all the time, Kim says many cancer patients need emotional rather than physical support, but some men don’t want to talk to their wives about fear of cancer recurrence or death.

The quality of the relationship also counts in the level of burden experienced and care effectiveness. An insecure relationship with a husband or wife will lead to a difficult caregiving situation. “If the caregiver doesn’t like the spouse but all of a sudden the husband or wife gets sick, then the spouse can feel stuck,” says Kim.

To help caregivers be most effective without sacrificing their own health and well-being, more studies are needed to identify caregivers in high-stress situations in order to predict who will have the most difficult time providing care, and then resources need to be available to give them relief.

