

Understanding and Treating Cancer Fatigue

By Judith A. Greenfield, PhD, RN

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Jane Poulson¹, a general internist and palliative care physician who taught communication skills to undergraduates and oncology fellows, thought she knew a lot about cancer and cancer patients. After being diagnosed with breast cancer, however, she realized that knowing a lot about cancer did not mean she knew about having the disease. She could not, she said, "...believe the extraordinary difference in feelings between being the doctor and being the patient in the same clinic".

Chief among her physical complaints was fatigue, which by far exceeded the fatigue she had experienced in her hitherto active, athletic life. Nothing relieved it – not even the things she had typically advised her patients to do. Her experience of cancer fatigue (which she found both physically and emotionally trying) has since led her to campaign for investigators to consider, and study, fatigue as an important symptom of cancer.

For now, however, the question is: what can healthcare professionals do to help their patients deal with cancer fatigue? One answer is to direct patients and their families to visit <http://www.cancerfatigue.org/>, the website of the Oncology Nursing Society (ONS). Although the site's offerings are targeted to patients, professionals can also benefit from the information contained therein – some of which includes information about rating and managing fatigue as well as listings of times and dates for free educational teleconferences. Last, but not least, offering a sympathetic ear to patients' complaints of fatigue, and validating the reality of it, can help lessen any emotional downslide it may evoke.□

¹ Jane Poulson, "Patient Perspective: The High Cost of Wisdom", *Medical Encounter* 15(3): 8-9 (Summer 2000).

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