



Brief summaries of the latest clinical findings

SEXUAL HEALTH COUNSELING

Tackling a Delicate Subject With Heart Failure Patients

Nurses caring for heart failure patients typically feel they have a responsibility to counsel patients on sexual health; however, they don't always do it. Sometimes the reasons are personal, sometimes institutional. Whatever the reasons, it's a problem, say researchers from the University of Groningen in Groningen, The Netherlands, because so many patients with heart failure experience sexual difficulties that affect their quality of life. Additionally, if left up to patients, the discussion may never happen.

The researchers surveyed 146 nurses about their general practice of discussing sexual health and the barriers, as they perceive them, to discussion. Of the respondents, 58 said they address sexuality with patients, and 88 said they do not.

Only 1% of the respondent nurses said they frequently discussed sexual health with their patients. Most (91%) did so occasionally or rarely; 8% never did. And, although 75% of the respondents agreed that they have a responsibility to talk about sexual health with their patients, only 37% said initiating such a discussion was "usually" appropriate, compared with the 5% who said it's "always" appropriate. Half never referred the patients with questions about sexuality to other professions.

Nurses who said they discussed sexual health were more likely to cite barriers related to patient factors, such as culture and ethnicity, religion, language, severity of illness, and the nurse's belief that the patient does not see sexuality as a problem. Nurses who said they don't initiate discussions often experienced more barriers related to external factors, such as lack of training, lack of general knowledge, lack of knowledge about how to initi-

ate the topic, and that the patient does not initiate the discussion.

For the 49% of nurses who discuss sexuality and the 79% of those who don't, lack of an organizational policy was the main barrier. That's a surprising finding, the researchers say, because heart failure guidelines recommend that health care providers discuss sexual health with both patients and their partners. However, heart failure clinics may not follow through on the policy by ensuring that discussion is established in the protocols. The researchers also note that nurses who discuss sexual health more often reported going on to higher education about sexual counseling; they suggest that nurses may benefit from specific training courses to help them refine their communication skills and feel more comfortable with the subject. ●

Source: Hoekstra T, Lesman-Leegte I, Couperus MF, Sanderma R, Jaarsma T. *Heart Lung*. 2012;41(5):492-499.
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