Using breast/cervical screening as a ‘teachable moment’ to raise awareness of ovarian cancer symptoms in women with normal results: A focus group study

Background: Although cancer awareness campaigns have been shown to increase GP consultations, some types of cancer are less often the focus of campaign activity. There is a need therefore to consider strategies that target members of the public who are at most risk of these types of cancer, in particular cancers with non-specific symptoms that could be interpreted as relating to common/treatable conditions. Ovarian cancer provides one such example. This study explored whether women’s contact with the NHS for the purpose of cancer screening could be utilised as a ‘teachable moment’ with respect to the distribution of information about ovarian cancer with all-clear breast or cervical screening results.

Methods: Six focus groups were held with a total of 38 women within the age range of the breast and cervical screening programmes (25–70 years). The groups took place in community venues in the northern cities of Hull, Leeds and Newcastle and in Greater London. Prior to the meetings, participants were sent an information leaflet produced by the charity Target Ovarian Cancer (TOC). The focus was women’s perceptions of a proposed strategy to include the leaflet with all-clear results from breast or cervical screening. We wanted to know whether the strategy was acceptable to them and whether it could be improved. Women were asked to talk about what they knew about ovarian cancer prior to their receipt of the leaflet. They were also asked their opinion on the leaflet’s content, readability and accessibility, as well as its visual layout. The women then hypothesised how they might feel if the leaflet was included with an all-clear result they received following breast/cervical screening. Discussions were digitised and transcribed verbatim. We applied a thematic framework method of analysis to the data.

Findings: The majority of women stated they had little to no knowledge of ovarian cancer symptoms prior to their receipt of the leaflet. The small minority with previous knowledge of ovarian cancer had a relative/friend with this diagnosis. Several women assumed cervical screening would detect ovarian cancer and spoke of this as a general belief amongst their women associates. Linked to this, women thought the leaflet was more likely to be read if it included with all-clear results of breast rather than cervical screening. The groups suggested alternative methods of leaflet distribution to avoid such confusion, perceived positive and negative aspects of the information, suggested ways to improve the visual appearance and content of the leaflet and discussed the use of different media outlets for the information.

Conclusion: Focus group data highlight a lack of knowledge regarding ovarian cancer and some confusion over the purpose of cervical screening, which correlates with other studies. Including information leaflets about different types of cancer with all-clear results would therefore not only be a novel way of providing information regarding the signs and symptoms of other cancers to already receptive individuals (that is, those who take up screening), but demonstrates the potential to increase knowledge and understanding of the purpose of existing screening programmes. TOC are currently redesigning their leaflet, taking on board findings from this study.

References: