Some breast cancer survivors dogged by anxiety

Study finds 20% suffer distress for up to 2 years after treatment is complete

By POON CHIAN HUI

FOR breast cancer survivors, the fight is not always over, even after completing chemotherapy.

Researchers from the National University of Singapore found that 20 per cent of them continue to suffer mental distress.

Their state of anxiety persists as long as six months to two years after they had their last chemotherapy dose.

The main cause of it is the lingering side effects from the treatment, ranging from numbness to an unsteady walk and dizziness, said the study’s principal investigator Alexandre Chan of the university’s pharmacy department.

With the population of cancer survivors set to grow, mainly due to better treatment, the study aims to shed more light on the kind of support they need after the disease is gone.

Said Associate Professor Chan: “I think we have been neglecting this group for a long time. We need to look ahead of time to find ways to improve the survivorship of patients.”

Breast cancer is the top cancer among women in Singapore, with about 1,624 new cases and 381 deaths every year, according to the latest national figures. If discovered early, the chances of survival can be as high as 90 per cent.

The study of 330 patients from the National Cancer Centre Singapore (NCCS) over a three-year period examined mental distress among breast cancer patients before, during and after chemotherapy.

One in four women suffered anxiety problems – with the effects most pronounced for those undergoing chemotherapy at the point of the interviews.

The findings, published in International Journal of Supportive Care in Cancer, mark the first documentation of the prevalence of anxiety and its reasons among Singapore breast cancer patients.

The rate is higher than in some Asian countries such as Thailand, where it is 16 per cent, but it is lower than in Western nations, in the United Kingdom, 35 per cent reported mental distress.

That their anxiety persists months after chemotherapy surprised Prof Chan, who is also an associate consultant clinical pharmacist at NCCS.

Levels remained high at 20 per cent, compared to the pre-chemotherapy rate of 9 per cent.

One reason he gave is that the body takes time to repair nerve cells affected by chemotherapy. That is why side effects can persist for many months after, he added.

Breast cancer patient Chua Puay Hoon, 51, who completed her chemotherapy regimen in January, said she still experiences numbness in her hands and feet.

“I am a little more clumsy,” said the nurse clinician, adding that she now avoids wearing high heels. “Sometimes, I also feel too tired to cook, and will eat at the Hawker Centre instead.”

Such fatigue adds to the person’s mental distress as well, the NUS study found. Those taking psychiatric drugs like anti-depressants also tend to show signs of anxiety.

Prof Chan suggested that “wellness centres” be set up to help cancer survivors come to grips with the after-effects of treatment.

Although they continue to attend regular follow-up consultations with the cancer specialist, such sessions could be brief.

“There is a short amount of time for interaction, so difficult topics may not be covered,” said Prof Chan.

Madam Chua said such a wellness centre will be