Working after cancer: in-depth perspectives from a setting with limited employment protection policies

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Abstract

Purpose A considerable proportion of individuals who are diagnosed with cancer are at a working age. We aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges, and arising needs related to working after cancer in a setting with limited employment protection policies.

Methods Focus group discussions were conducted with cancer patients who were diagnosed at least 1 year prior to recruitment, and either had paid work, were self-employed, currently unemployed, or currently retired (N = 66).

Results Three main themes were identified: (1) loss of income: While some participants were entitled for a 1-year cancer-specific sick leave, many other participants recounted having insufficient paid sick leave, forcing them to take prolonged unpaid leave to complete treatment; (2) dealing with side effects of cancer and its treatment: The need for workplace accommodations was highlighted including flexible working hours, lighter workloads, and dedicated rest areas to enable patients to cope better; (3) Discrimination and stigma at workplace: Some participants mentioned being passed over on a promotion, getting demoted, or being forced to resign once their cancer diagnosis was disclosed, highlighting an urgent need to destigmatize cancer in the workplace.

Conclusion In settings with limited employment protection policies, a cancer diagnosis severely impacts the working experiences of patients, leading to financial loss. Urgent interventions and legislative reforms are needed in these settings to address the unmet employment needs of cancer survivors.

Implications for Cancer Survivors This study may facilitate planning of local solutions to fulfill the unmet employment needs following cancer, such as return-to-work navigation services.

Keywords Cancer · Survivorship · Supportive care · Return to work · Employment

Introduction

Advances in cancer screening and treatment have resulted in a growing population of cancer survivors in most parts of the world [1]. In 2019, an estimated 17 million Americans were living with cancer [2]. By the year 2030, this number is projected to rise to 22 million, with similar trends observed elsewhere [3, 4]. Increasingly, a rising number of younger adults will be diagnosed with cancer, particularly those in the age group of 25 to 49 years old, when work ability and employment play an important role in their lives [5].

A review comprising 64 quantitative studies had previously shown that between 26 and 53% of cancer survivors either lost their jobs or quit working upon being diagnosed with cancer [6]. Compared to their counterparts without cancer, cancer survivors were also significantly associated with a higher risk of unemployment [7]. It has also been reported