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Letter to Editor

Mental Health and Quality of Life of Breast Cancer Patients During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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COVID-19 first broke out on December 17, 2019, in Wuhan, China, and was declared a worldwide pandemic on March 11, 2020, according to the World Health Organization (1). Studies have shown that the incidence and mortality rate of COVID-19 is affected by age and specific diseases. Breast cancer patients may be more vulnerable to COVID-19 because of having a weakened immune system (2).

In addition, COVID-19 has led to delays in the early diagnosis and chemotherapy of cancer patients. These interruptions would affect the outcome of treatment and also cause psychological problems. In general, cancer patients are at higher risk for psychological problems than the healthy population. The diagnosis and treatment of cancer can reduce the mental health of patients and their symptoms of depression and anxiety (3). The COVID-19 pandemic has also led to the closure of many medical and psychological centers and their online operations. This puts a lot of stress on cancer patients, especially women with breast cancer. Receiving a diagnosis of breast cancer, the most common cancer in women, is very painful and difficult and has long-term effects on the mental health and quality of life of these patients (4).

In Iran, many women with breast cancer experienced many problems during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, Choobin et al. (5) studied the cognitive and emotional impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Iranian women with breast cancer. They found a high prevalence of depression and anxiety, as well as impaired cognitive functions, in these patients, which requires psychological interventions. On the other hand, Chen et al. (2) showed that 220 and 243 patients showed symptoms of depression and anxiety. Also, 86.5% of cancer patients were afraid of their disease progression. Meanwhile, people with lower levels of education showed more stress and anxiety. The results of the study of Cui et al. (3) showed that 51.2%, 62.8%, 51.2%, and 35.5% of cancer patients showed symptoms of depression, anxiety, insomnia, and post-traumatic stress. Wang et al. (4) reported that 23.4%, 17.7%, and 9.3% of cancer patients had depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Patients with a history of mental disorders, alcohol and drug addiction also experienced greater anxiety.

Social distancing and home quarantine have reduced the quality of life of breast cancer patients (6). If the mental health of cancer patients is not taken into account, their

quality of life will be significantly reduced. In this regard, the World Health Organization has warned about the mental health of people during the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies have paid less attention to the quality of life impacts of COVID-19 and have focused more on its physical symptoms (7). The outbreak of COVID-19 and the consequent living in home quarantine has affected the lifestyle of people, especially women with breast cancer. Many women with cancer have significantly cut off social networking or online communication due to their weaker immune systems, which has significantly reduced the quality of life of these patients (8). In this regard, the results of research by Bargon et al. (6) showed that patients' emotional performance was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with 48% of patients reporting moderate to severe loneliness. A significant reduction in quality of life and physical and mental health of breast cancer patients was observed. Studies by Jeppesen et al. (7) found that 90% of cancer patients did not visit the hospital in person for fear of developing COVID-19, and 80% were highly concerned about COVID-19. The mean quality of life and emotional performance of patients were 71.3% and 82.8%, respectively, which decreased due to fear of developing COVID-19. The results of the study by Baffert et al. (8) also indicated a high prevalence of anxiety in patients. Female sexuality and poor lifestyle lead to a significant reduction in the quality of life of cancer patients.

According to studies, the mental health and quality of life of women with breast cancer have decreased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the need for psychological interventions is felt more than ever (5-7). But because cancer patients have a comprised immune system and should avoid crowded places during the COVID-19

pandemic, telepsychiatry is one of the ways that can improve the mental health and quality of life of these patients (9).

Telepsychiatry is defined as the provision of psychological care and the exchange of psychiatric care information with the aim of providing psychiatric services remotely. It can be utilized during the COVID-19 pandemic because it can intervene in a timely manner in medical emergencies, has no geographical or time constraints, does not require a face-to-face visit, and most importantly, can protect patients with breast cancer against many of the post-traumatic stress disorders (10).

Breast cancer, as the most common cancer diagnosed in women, has many psychological consequences for patients and affects the quality of life of many women with breast cancer. In addition, with the COVID-19 pandemic and home quarantine, the stress and anxiety of these patients were significantly increased. Since having good mental health and quality of life is one of the most important criteria for the effectiveness of treatment of many specific diseases, including cancer, it is necessary to pay more attention to the mental health of women with breast cancer in addition to medical treatments. More than a year after the COVID-19 pandemic, we are still witnessing the mutation of this deadly virus worldwide, and a definite date for the end of the COVID-19 era is inconceivable. Thus, it is necessary, first of all, to plan to improve the mental health of women with breast cancer. Expanding virtual and online services centers to increase the awareness of patients regarding self-care, the importance of vaccination, and physical and mental health is among the approaches that can improve the psychological health and quality of life of women with breast cancer.