The Psychological and Social Impact of Stoma Surgery

Background to the Problem

This project will define what it is like to live with a stoma. A stoma is an artificial opening in the bowel, created by a surgeon to divert the flow of faeces and/or urine. The bowel is diverted and placed on the abdomen and the patient is required to wear a ‘bag’ – a stoma appliance – and empty this on a daily basis. In the UK, 13,500 people undergo stoma surgery annually.

Background to the Problem

Previous studies have explored quality of life in stoma patients. These have identified many anxieties felt by new stoma patients. Many of the concerns which patients with stomas express are body image problems. The anxieties and fears include noise, odour, leakage, visibility of an appliance and perceived attractiveness to others. Whilst these anxieties are mainly practicalities of stoma care management, the studies suggest that these issues contribute to the psychological adjustment and adaptation of the patient. Impact of a cancer diagnosis and/or colorectal surgery seems to be greater if a stoma is formed than if stoma-sparing surgery is performed.

Those patients more likely to experience difficulties in psychological adjustment include those who have a previous history of psychological problems, those who express dissatisfaction with pre-operative information and those expressing negative thoughts of stoma surgery and its impact. It is important to remember that some patients will react with shock and disgust at the thought of having a stoma as this type of surgery has a profound effect on the mind as well as the body.

Illness or disability may bring about great emotional pressures and consequently people need to be able to think about their situation, sometimes in privacy and sometimes with those close to them or health care professionals. The planning and implementation of care for a patient with a newly formed stoma is very important, as the effect of stoma surgery has the potential to alienate patients from social activity so that they become reclusive in nature and create elements of depression. The loss of part of their internal organs and the creation of an external one is a loss that needs to be mourned and the patient may well go through the various stages of grief.

People who undergo stoma surgery must not only contend with the immediate physical changes that the surgery brings about but must also adjust to the psychological impact of stoma formation. The experience of having a gastrointestinal illness resulting in stoma surgery represents a major change in a patient’s life. The patient is in a position where they have to cope with a complex ‘roller-coaster’ of emotional, social and physical problems associated with the newly formed stoma.

The anxieties faced include feelings of alteration in their body image, function and control of stoma as well as restrictions within their current lifestyle and activity, all of
which have the potential for major impact on relationships, including sexual function. Some healthcare professionals believe that discussing sexuality will make patients feel uncomfortable. However a survey in 1992 identified the need for such discussion, including the negative impact on the patient’s rehabilitation and adaptation to the disease process and subsequent treatment if the discussion was lacking.

**Addressing the Challenge**

Through a selection of interviews the study will explore the psychological impact of stoma surgery including changes in body image and the perception of one’s own attractiveness as well as ways in which nurses can assist the patient through this period of adaptation. This is especially important, as it is not uncommon for patients with new stomas to experience feelings of degradation, isolation, and mutilation.

The research will review the educational needs of stoma patients that will be adapted to provide healthcare professionals with the skills and knowledge required to care for them.

If health care professionals can acquire a greater understanding of the needs of this group, then strategies can be planned to address these issues, thereby improving quality of life.

**Remaining Cost of this Project: £3,005**