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An Online Intervention for Lung Cancer Caregivers Buffers Negative Mood in Bereavement

San Francisco, CA - Cancer patients depend on family caregivers for physical and emotional support throughout their disease, especially with disease progression and end of life. But caregiver burden can complicate bereavement. The Comprehensive Health Enhancement Support System (CHESS) is an online system that provides a continuous source of information, communication and coaching to lung cancer caregivers across care giving and bereavement.

In a paper session on Friday March 22, at 3:45 pm Pacific Time, at the Society of Behavioral Medicine's 34th Annual Meeting & Scientific Sessions, Dr. Lori DuBenske from the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, Department of Psychiatry will describe her study examining the impact of CHESS on caregiver bereavement and discuss the results.

"Earlier research had shown a benefit to caregivers while caring for someone with cancer, but this research shows a continuing benefit to the caregiver in bereavement," says Dr. DuBenske, project director and co-investigator of the study.

End of life and terminal conditions such as lung cancer tend to get less attention and in most cases, caregiver support ends when the patient dies. "CHESS's 'Coping with Lung Cancer: A Network of Support' website represents an innovation in offering caregiver support across the continuum from care giving through bereavement," says Dr. DuBenske.

In the study, caregivers were randomly assigned to either CHESS or the Internet for up to 25 months. Caregivers agreed to use CHESS or the Internet and complete bimonthly surveys. They were provided a computer, Internet service and training if needed. Mood was measured in care giving and bereavement surveys with the Profile of Mood States depression, anxiety and anger subscales.

"We looked at predictors of caregiver mood at three and five months after the patient died," explains Dr. DuBenske. "For the Internet group, higher levels of depression and anger prior to patient death predicted higher levels in bereavement, while the CHESS group had lower levels of depression and anger in bereavement regardless of pre-death levels."

This research shows the promise of eHealth systems in supporting caregivers in adjusting to loss and "re-entry" after care giving.

In addition to Dr. DuBenske, the study was co-authored by David H. Gustafson, PhD; Ming-Yuan Chih, MHA, MS; Amy Atwood, PhD; Robert Hawkins, PhD; and James Cleary, MD, from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine

and Public Health; and Kang Namkoong, PhD, of the University of Kentucky.

The authors reported no financial interests and/or other relationships.

The Society of Behavioral Medicine (www.sbm.org) is a multidisciplinary organization of clinicians, educators, and scientists dedicated to promoting the study of the interactions of behavior with biology and the environment and the application of that knowledge to improve the health and well being of individuals, families, communities and populations.

This study was presented during the 2013 Annual Meeting & Scientific Sessions of the Society of Behavioral Medicine (SBM) from March 20-23 in San Francisco, CA. However, it does not reflect the policies or the opinion of the SBM.

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