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“Getting it off my chest”: exploring the lived experiences of breast cancer diagnosis and treatment in women of reproductive age

De Weerdt, Miranda

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Abstract

It is not easy being diagnosed and treated for breast cancer, as a diagnosis of breast cancer can cut to the very core of what it means to be a woman. In this study, I focused on the experiences of women of reproductive age who had been diagnosed and treated with breast cancer. After conducting interviews with 14 participants – including biomedical practitioners, members of various support-groups involved in guiding women through their journey, and women two to three years post breast cancer treatment – I was able to gain a better understanding of what Audrey Lorde meant by her expression 'breast cancer warrior'. Common themes of these women's interviews draws attention to delays in initial diagnosis premised on the age of the participants, the result of misconceptions, and perceptions of breast cancer in South Africa. Women's journeys included diagnosis, treatment, adjuvant therapy, and how their experiences of these affected their lifestyles and their understanding of future life trajectories. To the extent that society places significant importance on outward appearance, women's loss of identity due to alopecia and/or mastectomy, or their sense of narrative disruption, was significant in the overall experience. I also consider the role of various support systems in helping women come to terms with their new identity as survivors.