

Postprint

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Parenthood in young cancer survivors is more than a combination of motivation and capacity

Lewis, P. and Mooney-Somers, J. (2016)

Schmidt et al. (2016) recently reviewed published literature on the reproductive intentions and parenthood motivations of cancer survivors. The authors highlight cancer survivors' incentives for entering parenthood and concerns about having children post-diagnosis. This welcome addition to the literature on parenthood in survivors of cancer in adolescence and young adulthood throws into sharp relief an important gap in current research: the experiences of cancer survivors who do become parents after cancer diagnosis. Between 1998 and 2004, the relative survival rate for Australians aged 12–24 years diagnosed with cancer was 85% (AIHW 2011). In theory, most of these young survivors had many years to consider and/or become parents.

In our recent study of young people's experiences of 'Growing up with Cancer' (Lewis et al. 2013), we heard from two women who became mothers despite being told by their oncologist that they were infertile as a result of cancer treatment. They described parenthood as a positive experience, helping them find purpose in a life that had been destabilised by cancer, 'motherhood gave me something more to look forward to in life. It's also helping me to actually want to get on track' (Lewis 2013).

We also know from our research that some young cancer survivors face lifelong challenges managing the ongoing effects of illness and treatment including chronic pain, chronic fatigue, and the ever present apprehension of relapse or a second cancer. We simply do not know how these ongoing effects shape how young cancer survivors experience parenthood, enact the parenting role or relate to their children. For example, several young survivors we interviewed would face serious additional physical and emotional challenges as parents (Lewis et al. 2013). How would a young man with the pain associated with avascular necrosis enjoy sports with his children? Or how would a young woman living with graft-versus-host disease cope with a full working week and participate in her children's after school activities? How would young survivors manage the constant worry about relapse, the emotional and financial strain of treatment on a young family, or the prospect of their family coping with the loss of a parent?

That is, young cancer survivors' experience of parenthood will be shaped by their cancer experience. At the same time, parenthood may intensify the physical and emotional challenges that many young

cancer survivors already live with, or produce new unexpected challenges. Until healthcare professionals understand the nature of parenthood for young cancer survivors, they cannot effectively help prepare them for it. Examining the experiences of young cancer survivors who have become parents and are living with the ongoing effects of their illness and treatment can provide valuable insights.

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