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SOCIAL SUPPORT AND CANCER: STAGE OF TREATMENT AND PHYSICAL COMPLAINTS AS MEDIATING FACTORS. W Ros, A Couzijn, J Winnubst. Department of Clinical Psychology and Health, State University Utrecht, Heidelberglaan 2, P.O. Box 80104, 3508 TC Utrecht, The Netherlands.

In this project we studied the influence of social support on the wellbeing of lung cancer patients treated with radiotherapy. The patients completed a questionnaire three times in all: prior to the beginning of radiotherapy, three months later and finally, five months after the commencement of their treatment.

Information was gathered about social support, physical health and psychological wellbeing. Four types of social support were distinguished: emotional support from partner, family and friends, informational support from partner, family and friends, emotional support from doctors and other health care-providers and informational support from doctors and other health care-providers. Physical health was assessed on the basis of general health complaints. Anxiety, depression and quality of life were also measured as constituting the central criteria of psychological wellbeing.

Results show that the effectiveness of social support depends on stage of treatment reached. Support given by doctors and other professionals is helpful, especially during diagnosis and at the commencement of treatment. Emotional support given by the partner, family and friends becomes increasingly important over time.

Results further indicate that the incidence of physical complaints, is an important factor to the effectiveness of social support. For patients with relatively few complaints we found positive correlations of all types of social support with wellbeing. For patients with many complaints,, no correlations were found between both types of emotional support and wellbeing and slight, but statistically significant, negative correlations were apparent between both types of informational support and wellbeing.

These results show the specificity of the way social support works and may provide a useful clue for practical application - both for clinical and psychosocial practice, as well as for developing intervention programmes.