Abstract

Objective Understanding the social representation of breast cancer and how it has influenced breast cancer prevention and self-care practice in a group of women from the city of Medellín. Methods This was a qualitative study using 19 semi-structured interviews with adult females who had not had breast cancer, using maximum variation criterion as sampling technique. The analysis was orientated by grounded theory. Results Some women physiologically represented breast cancer while others represented it by its social and psychological effects. They identified its causes with personal and emotional problems and certain daily habits such as inadequate food ("a bodily payback for the abuses which we subject ourselves to"). Discussion The word "breast cancer" was associated with inevitable death, terror, suffering, incurability, devastation, powerlessness and pain. This cancer has strong social representation due to its severe implications for females, their attractiveness and self-image. Conclusions The persistence of breast cancer's negative image is associated with the life-style myth; (1) for which people tend to blame the patient. Our biological reductionism hides environmental, social and political factors. We are obsessed by the dangers and their control (2) and powerful images are added to these messages such as those in which "one out of nine women will develop breast cancer" to foster self-responsibility (2). However, the ghost of cancer in developing societies in which many people are still trapped is magnified and has also yet to be overcome.

Keywords
Nursing research, qualitative research, breast cancer, women's health, prevention, self-care.