

Communication Skills Training for Healthcare Professionals Working With Patients With Cancer, Their Families, and Carers

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Objective

To assess whether communication skills training is effective in changing healthcare professionals' behavior in cancer care with regard to communication and interaction with patients.

Type of Review

A review of three randomized, controlled trials (RCTs) with data extraction occurring in relation.

Relevance for Nursing

Communication among healthcare professionals and patients is essential for the delivery of high-quality care. According to the current review, communication skills training programs do have a positive effect on the communication behavior of experienced nurses and physicians working in cancer care.

Characteristics of the Evidence

The review included three RCTs, with a total of 347 healthcare professionals. All studies needed to assess the professionals before and after communication skills training, measuring changes in behavior and skills using objective and validated scales. The RCTs included administration of communication skills training where the control group received usual or alternative training to the intervention group. Participants were qualified healthcare professionals working in all hospital, hospice, and ambulatory care oncology settings.

One study provided an intensive three-day course and assessed physicians interacting with 640 patients. Another study provided a modular course and assessed

role play among oncology nurses. The third study was modular and assessed outcomes with clinical and simulated interviews and patient questionnaires.

Although only three studies were used, the authors felt that training programs appeared to be effective in improving some areas of oncology healthcare professionals' communication skills. However, the comparative efficacy of the programs or whether the training would be effective if taught by others was unknown.

Summary of Key Evidence

In one of the studies, analyses were conducted investigating the effects of the course and the written feedback. At follow-up, the course attendees used significantly more focused and open questions than those who had not attended a course. Physicians who attended the course increased their empathy and appropriate responses compared to those who did not. In another study, the only significant difference observed was that the group who received communication skills training displayed more control than the untrained group during the follow-up interview. The final study found that trained nurses used less emotionally-neutral utterances when interviewing patients.

Although no major differences existed in the form of communication, the studies offer some evidence that communication skills training can have a beneficial effect on the communication and behavior of trained healthcare professionals when interacting with patients with cancer.

Best Practice Recommendations

Two of the communication skills training programs used in the trials did have a positive effect on the communication behavior of experienced nurses and physicians working in oncology care, suggesting that providing communication skills training could be beneficial.

Research Recommendations

Additional research about the long-term efficacy of communication skills training is needed, for example, examining compulsory rather than voluntary training. The comparative efficacy of different training programs also is unknown, as is the efficacy of the same training programs if conducted by other trainers. Therefore, studies comparing communication skills training programs or evaluating the efficacy of training programs not conducted by the developers would be informative.

Bibliography

Moore, P.M., Wilkinson, S.S.M., & Rivera Mercado, S. (2004). Communication skills training for healthcare professionals working with cancer patients, their families, and/or carers. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, 2004, CD003751.

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