Comparing Communication Training Programs for Cancer Doctors

Principal investigator

James Tulsky, MD

Organization

Dana-Farber Cancer Institute

What was the research about?

People who have cancer often feel scared, anxious, or depressed. They may have a hard time asking questions or listening to what their doctor is saying. When doctors respond to patients with understanding, or empathy, patients may be more able to follow treatment plans.

In this study, the research team created a training program called SCOPE. The program focuses on increasing doctors' skills in responding to patients' feelings. The team wanted to learn whether, compared with a standard training program, SCOPE improved

- How satisfied patients were with their doctor's communication
- How often cancer doctors showed empathy for their patients' feelings

What were the results?

Satisfaction with doctor communication didn't differ between patients who saw doctors in SCOPE and patients who saw doctors in the standard training program. A month after the program, doctors in SCOPE showed empathy for their patients three times as often as doctors in the standard program.

Who was in the study?

The study started with 148 cancer doctors from across the United States. But only 27 doctors finished the study. Of these, 63 percent were white, 22 percent were Asian, and 15 percent were other races. The average age was 53, and 85 percent were men.

What did the research team do?

The research team assigned cancer doctors by chance to SCOPE or a standard training program. Before starting their programs, each doctor audio-recorded clinic visits with four patients. The doctors also gave surveys to five patients. Surveys asked about the patients' satisfaction with their doctor's communication.

Doctors in SCOPE watched online training videos that taught communication skills and how to respond to patients' feelings. Doctors received patient survey results and feedback on their clinic visit recordings from the research team and a patient advisory group. The feedback pointed out times doctors used skills from the videos; it also gave advice on things doctors could improve. After finishing the video lessons, each doctor recorded two more clinic visits. Doctors got a second round of feedback on these recordings.

Doctors in the standard training program received patient survey results but didn't get feedback on their videos. After completing the training, the doctors set goals for improving their communication with patients.

A month after completing their programs, all doctors recorded four more clinic visits. They also collected surveys from five new patients. The research team compared these recordings and surveys with those from the start of the study. The doctors submitted a total of 455 patient surveys and 254 clinic visit recordings.

An advisory group of patient advocates gave input throughout the study.

What were the limits of the study?

Because only 27 doctors finished the study, the research team can't say for sure how well SCOPE works. Before the study, cancer doctors had to take communication training to stay certified. During the study, such training became voluntary, which may have reduced how many doctors finished the study.

Future research could explore ways to add communication training to existing programs that improve cancer care quality.

How can people use the results?

Hospitals and health clinics could use these results when considering ways to help cancer doctors improve their communication skills.

To learn more about this project, visit www.pcori.org/Tulsky289.