ABSTRACT

Objectives. No study has yet assessed the benefits of a communication skills training program on patients' perceptions of care quality. The purpose of this study is to assess the association between patients' characteristics and physicians' communication skills before and after a communication skills training program.

Methods. Correlations between physicians' communication skills and patients' characteristics were measured before and after a communication skills training program. Consultations were audio-recorded and transcribed. Communication skills were rated according to the Cancer Research Campaign Workshop Evaluation Manual. Patients' characteristics (sociodemographic, physical and psychological) were measured before and after training.

Results. Sixty-three physicians were included. Before training, physicians' communication skills were associated with one patients' sociodemographic characteristic and with one psychological characteristic. After training, physicians' communication skills were associated with none of the patients' sociodemographic characteristics and with four psychological characteristics.

Conclusions. This study highlights that physicians' patient-centeredness may be improved through a communication skills training program. After training, physicians are more centered on patients' psychological characteristics and not on patients' sociodemographic characteristics anymore. This study underlines the need to design communication skills training which may further improve patient-centeredness.

INTRODUCTION

A generally accepted definition of patient-centeredness does not exist. Patient-centeredness can be defined as physicians' behaviors which enable patients' verbal expression about their perspectives on illness and treatment and health-related behaviors, their symptoms, concerns, ideas and expectations (Smith & Hoppe, 1991). This implies:

- That physicians use facilitating behaviors, i.e. behaviors that aim to elucidate patients' perspective on illness and treatment (Maguire et al., 1996; Maguire et al., 1996);

- That physicians adapt their communication skills to patients' specific characteristics (psychological and physical) and not to patients' sociodemographic characteristics anymore. This study underlines the need to design communication skills training which may further improve patient-centeredness.

METHODS

Subjects

Eligibility criteria: Physicians had to be specialists; to be working with cancer patients (part time or full time).

Study design and assessment procedure

- Communication skills were assessed during a consultation before and after a communication skills training program.
- Consultations were audio-recorded and transcribed.
- Communication skills were rated according to the Cancer Research Campaign Workshop Evaluation Manual (Booth et al., 1991).

Training Program

- Plenary theoretical session (2 hours)
- Enlarged Group
- Small group (5-6 participants)
- Topics pre-defined and situations experienced
- Immediate feedback of the trainer
- Clinical case discussions

RESULTS

Descriptive analysis and correlations were conducted.

DISCUSSION

Before the training program, physicians communication skills' use is only associated with one general characteristic that is age. Physicians adapt only modestly their communication skills to patients.

After the 19-hour training program, physicians are more centered on specific characteristics such as psychological and physical characteristics and they are not centered on patients' sociodemographic characteristics anymore. They seem to communicate with patients based on specific and less observable characteristics and to focus less on general and observable characteristics. Physicians seem to be more patient-centered.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


ACKNOWLEDGMENT: This research program was supported by the - Fonds National pour la Recherche Scientifique - Section Télémétrie - of Belgium.