Comparing Messages in an Online Communication Forum for Cancer Patients with Patients' Messages to a Clinical Nurse Specialist

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Background

Despite a growing interest in online support forums and patient-provider communication systems, knowledge of the relative use and benefits of these communication systems is still limited. In particular, there is little information about online patient-nurse communication and the potential for nurses to support patients via the Internet.

Purpose

To compare the content of patient-nurse messages to messages posted on an online discussion forum for cancer patients as part of an ongoing trial testing the effects of WebChoice, an internet support system for breast- and prostate cancer patients.

About WebChoice

WebChoice is an internet support system for breast- and prostate cancer patients where

- **Patients can monitor symptoms over time.**
- **Patients have access to evidence-based self-management options tailored to their reported symptoms as well as general information about living with cancer.**
- **Patients can ask questions to a clinical nurse specialist via e-mail and exchange experiences with other patients in anonymous discussion groups.**

An ongoing randomized clinical trial evaluates effects of WebChoice on patient outcomes

Sample

- **71% of participants given access to WebChoice logged on at least once in the data collection period (43 females with breast cancer and 31 males with prostate cancer).**

- **We examined 355 forum postings and 174 e-mail messages submitted by patients who logged on to WebChoice at least once from March - October 2006.**

Method

- **Postings and messages were coded according to various ‘type’ and ‘topic’ categories as listed in Table 1 and 2 on the following slides. A message could be coded under more than one category.**

- **All messages were independently coded by two of the authors (AJ and TA) and 10% were coded by both to compare inter-rater agreement, established at 98 % for e-mails and 97 % for postings.**

Results

Table 1. Percentage of Messages Categorized by Type

	E-MAILS (174 total)	POSTINGS (355 total)
Personal experiences / opinions	66	75
Information giving	2	20
Information seeking	62	20
Encouragement / Support	0	17
Thanks	22	8

Results

Table 2. Percentage of Messages Categorized by Topic

	E-MAILS (174 total)	POSTINGS (355 total)
Health personnel /institutions	21	20
Treatment / Tests / Test results	63	59
Symptoms / Side-effects	64	66
Energy / Fatigue / Sleep	9	10
Feelings	14	10
Sexuality / Partner	3	7
Family / Colleagues / Others	5	3
Living with cancer / Lifestyle	22	23
Metastasis / Relapse	7	8
AVERAGE NUMBER OF TOPIC CATEGORIES	2.4 (±1.5)	2.3 (±1.3)

Results

- **More patients used the patient-nurse communication area (n=45 or 61% of WebChoice users) compared to those submitting postings to the forum (n=34 or 46%). This holds true for breast cancer patients as well as prostate cancer patients:**
- **72% of female users sent at least one e-mail to the nurse while 58% submitted at least one posting.**
- **45% of male users e-mailed the nurse while 29% contributed to the forum.**
- **However, patients submitted on average more postings (10.4±10.5) compared to the average number of e-mails sent to the nurse (3.9 ± 4.6).**

Discussion and Conclusion

The fact that more patients submitted messages to the nurse via e-mail compared to the forum and that the nature of messages in these two communication areas differ suggest that opportunities for patient-nurse communication can provide valuable support for patients beyond that of support offered by participation in online discussion groups.

Discussion and Conclusion

Most of the questions patients asked via e-mail could be appropriately addressed by the clinical nurse specialist and did not require advice from a physician or other specialist.

Online peer- and professional support provided by nurses could prove a viable health care supplement that can improve delivery of high quality patient care in the future.

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