

Health Literacy Month

Words Matter

Healthcare Communication and Emotional Wellbeing in Cancer Care

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Health literacy month encourages us to step back and reflect on the different comprehension and implementation of words, phrases and importantly their personal meaning.

It is said that 'words matter.' and this is especially true in the communication between healthcare professionals (HCPs) and their patients. Often each of us do not always grasp the emotional and physical impact of the exchange between HCPs and patients.

Misinterpretation of medical terms has led to changes like renaming Monkeypox to Mpxo. A notable example in rare diseases is the change from Primary Biliary Cirrhosis to Primary Biliary Cholangitis, which had a profoundly positive impact on patients by removing the inaccurate and negative association with alcohol consumption.

However, the need for more mindful language goes further than the names of diseases, it includes how we talk about the way a disease or a treatment may affect the individual living with it.

Words matter and the psychological interpretation and impact on the individual matters too.

To test this theory, a survey conducted with 62 people living with a cancer diagnosis were asked about their healthcare experience, specifically the communication exchange between the doctor at different points in their disease journey.

Read on to learn more....

Acknowledgement

A special thank you to **Bowel Cancer Support Group UK** for participating in the survey, your contributions are always appreciated.

Theme 1: Together on this journey/partnership

The elements of partnerships were imperative in ensuring the connectivity and mutual respect is shared between patients and their healthcare team. The results from the survey illustrated that words such as, “we’re in this together” and “we” had a positive effect on patients. They felt at “ease”, a personalised response, bond and a sense of appreciation between partners (doctor-patient).



Theme 2: Delivery of messages

We asked patients, if there were any specific words or phrase their healthcare team used which had a negative impact on them. Interestingly, the results suggested that patients observations of healthcare professionals tone of delivery was most impactful. Sometimes doctors can be quite “blunt” when telling people about their health issues, and linked to this the patient not feeling included within the discussion i.e. one way delivery with no option for a response. Patients felt that the delivery was not always empathetic towards them which influenced their mood and ability to comprehend the information.



Theme 3: Connectivity through transparency

Patients were asked if there was a moment when their healthcare teams words made them feel more hopeful or reassured. The consensus was directed towards transparency of information, feeling appreciated, welcomed (doctors body language). Using gentle humor within context was highlighted as a good method to reduce anxiety and maintain connectivity between the doctor and patient.

Theme 4: Ambiguity and readiness of information

Patients were asked if they could describe a moment their healthcare teams words made them feel anxious or worried? Clarity of information and the timing of delivery was imperative, some felt there was a disconnect between the doctors approach to sharing information and the belief that the patient felt “ready” to digest and understand the information. Anxiety often related to the waiting period of assessment results, being told about a disease which was unknown to the patient and emphasis on the term “urgent” i.e. urgent treatment, urgent surgery felt anxiety provoking to the individual.

For Health literacy month we wanted to provide insights into the importance of words and the impact and influence this has on patients overall experience, wellbeing and outcomes.

A patient friendly lexicon is essential for effective communication and developing trust.

Empowering patients to take an active role in their health management can have a significant impact, a vital part of this is forming partnerships through transparency and recognising the patients' ability and readiness to process all the information coming their way.

Figure 1: Words and approaches used by doctors in consultation that patients found unhelpful



Figure 2: Words and approaches used by doctors in consultation that patients found helpful



Let's work together to improve patients experience through communication – words matter.

About the authors



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Dr Riaz is a health psychologist and a patient engagement consultant and founder of Unboxed Psychology; a behaviour change consultancy. Unboxed Psychology focuses on behaviour modelling and formulating clinical and health interventions to support the development of robust and strategic interventions for patients and healthcare professionals. Sumira works directly with patients, focusing on therapeutic interventions involving pain management, mental health care, and psychological support for people living with chronic health disorders.

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Steve Clark was diagnosed with stage 4 colorectal cancer in 2013 and has since become an active patient advocate. He is a regular speaker for audiences of patients, healthcare professionals, researchers, and industry representatives as well as volunteering with several charities including being a Campaigns Ambassador for Cancer Research UK. Steve is a patient representative to several studies and study groups and has been co-author on a number of papers.

In 2017 he set up www.StriveForFive.org, a not-for-profit organization with the mission to give hope to fellow patients with stage 4 cancer and to advocate for improved care for those with advanced cancer.

He is a business and patient engagement consultant for the pharmaceutical industry with www.RedwoodBC.net and has worked in UK and global pharma for over 35 years in business management and global marketing.