Communication in Oncology Care: The Effectiveness of Skills Training Workshops for Healthcare Providers

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Communication skills are the cornerstone of the patient-provider relationship in cancer care. Lack of these skills can diminish patient disclosure, increase patient anxiety, and decrease satisfaction with care. The purpose of this article is to evaluate the literature regarding the efficacy and outcomes of communication skills training programs for healthcare providers in oncology. Using four databases, the author found 21 research articles about communication skills training programs for healthcare providers in oncology. The majority of published studies involved training programs for experienced clinicians (i.e., physicians, nurses, nurse practitioners, physician assistants) in oncology care. Programs varied in length from 18–105 hours and evaluated communication skills, patient satisfaction and anxiety, and provider confidence and perceived stress. Specific communication skills and provider confidence were statistically improved in 19 of 21 studies. Follow-up data showed maintenance of some skills and attrition of others. Longer programs with consolidation workshops are seen as more effective.

Literature Search Methods

When beginning to review the literature for a specific clinical question, researchers first must define the search terms or key words. For this search, “communication skills,” “healthcare providers,” “communication skills training programs,” and “psychological training programs” were used. Communication skills are the specific behaviors and responses that are used in a therapeutic relationship between a healthcare provider and a patient. Healthcare providers were the nurses, nurse practitioners, physicians, physician assistants, and other professionals involved in patient care. Communication skills training programs teach healthcare providers specific communication skills for use in their relationships with patients through didactic classes, role-playing, and/or feedback. Some literature refers to psychological training programs as the courses that teach communication skills and adaptive behaviors to improve the quality of the patient-provider relationship and alleviate provider stress; as a result, both programs are included in this article.

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