

Assessing the Consent Process-Do Patients Retain Information About Their Treatment?

The Problem

Consenting patients is more than obtaining a written informed consent. It is a process. Patients learn about their condition. The rationale for treatment, risks and benefits and expected outcomes are explained to the patient. Although the informed consent document is signed by every patient prior to their receiving radiation therapy, it is not known if patients retain this information when undergoing treatment. There may be many factors involved in patients understanding their radiation treatments. There can be issues with how the physician explains the treatment, language or cultural issues, situational issues (where and when treatment is discussed /consents are obtained) and patient anxiety. We conducted a small pilot project aimed to assess how effective our consenting process is in the Radiation Oncology Department.

Aim/Goal

During the consenting process, specific aspects of the radiation treatment and possible side effects are discussed with the patient. These are outlined in the informed consent document. The consenting process is performed several weeks before the initiation of treatment. The aim of this pilot project was to determine if patients retained key components of this discussion at the initiation of their treatment.

The Team

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The Interventions

- Study population: Patients who received external beam irradiation for localized prostate cancer
- Two physicians who treat prostate cancer perform the consenting process at the time when patients undergo CT scanning to plan the radiation treatments.
- Patients met with nursing at the initiation of radiation, a minimum of 2 weeks after the consent was obtained for radiation.
- Nurses documented patient's age, ethnicity, use of medical interpreter.
- Nurses query patients about the length of treatment and possible side effects.
 - Answer to length of treatment is correct if it is +/- one week of actual planned length of treatment (usually 7 ½ to 9 weeks)
 - Answer to possible side effects is correct if possible bowel and bladder toxicity is mentioned by the patient

The Results/Progress to Date

	Correctly remembered length of treatment	Correctly remembered possible bowel/rectal symptoms as potential side effect	Correctly remembered urinary symptoms as potential side effect
Physician 1 n=9	7	7	5
Physician 2 n=7	5	4	4

Lessons Learned

Clearly a proportion of patients do not completely retain key information about their radiation treatments from the time of radiation planning to initiation of treatment (min 2 weeks). It is important for the staff to frequently reinforce information regarding treatment.

Next Steps/What Should Happen Next

- This small pilot can be expanded in our department to other physicians with more patients treated to a variety of sites.
- More detailed analysis can be performed to determine if specific physicians have issues with communications.
- Specific ethnic groups may be found to be at risk of being under-informed as to their treatment.
- Specific clinical situations may be found to require additional time to properly inform patients
- This type of study where patients are queried as to goals, potential risks, benefits and potential outcomes is applicable in many other clinical situations throughout the medical center.