

Research Brief

A systematic review of surgeon-patient communication: strengths and opportunities for improvement

Summary

Effective communication is critical to patient satisfaction, as well as outcomes of care and malpractice prevention. Surgeons, in particular, need effective communication skills to discuss complicated procedures and help patients make informed choices.

We conducted a systematic review of the literature on surgeon-patient communication and found that surgeons predominantly focused on providing medical information to patients.

Implications

Surgeons can enhance their communication skills, particularly in areas of relative deficiency such as informed decision making, and expressing empathy. Studies in primary care demonstrate communication programs are effective in teaching these skills.

Communication skills training can be adapted to surgical training and ultimately lead to improved outcomes and satisfaction with care.

Reference: Levinson W, Hudak P, Tricco AC, et al. A systematic review of surgeon-patient communication: strengths and opportunities for improvement. *Patient Educ Couns.* 2013;93:3-17.

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What is the current situation?

- Despite the importance of effective communication to surgeons, relatively few studies in the literature have focused on communication between surgeons and patients.
- The absence of specialty specific information leaves surgery training programs without guidance in how best to teach trainees about effective communication.
- The Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education requires training in the competencies of interpersonal and communication skills. Hence, residency programs are seeking to develop high quality materials to form the basis for this education.

What is the objective?

To synthesize all descriptive studies examining the communication of surgeons during their interactions with patients, family members, and standardized patients. We aimed to bring these studies together to form a starting point for surgeons and for training programs to understand the existing literature in the field.

How was the review conducted?

- Searches were conducted in MEDLINE, EMBASE, PsycINFO, and Sociological Abstract.
- Two reviewers screened citations and full-text articles.
- One reviewer extracted all data using standardized data extraction form and a second reviewer verified data.
- Two reviewers classified all included studies to ensure validity.
- Quality was appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) tool.
- Studies were categorized into content of communication, patient satisfaction, relationship of communication to malpractice claims, and duration of visits

What did the review find?

- After screening 2,794 citations and 74 full-text articles, 21 studies and 13 companion reports were included.
- Surgeons spent the majority of their time educating patients and helping them to make informed choices.
- Surgeons were generally thorough in providing details about surgical conditions and treatments.
- Surgeons often did not explore the emotions or concerns of patients.
- Potential areas of improvement included discussing some elements of informed decision making, and expressing empathy

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