Understanding Patient Preferences on Providing Sociodemographic Information in an Acute Care Setting: A Qualitative Study

Summary

We examined patient perceptions of the routine collection of sociodemographic information (information about race, income, immigration status, and education) during short-term hospital treatment. Our findings were based on interviews that were conducted with 52 patients who were admitted to the General Internal Medicine or Geriatric Medicine units at a hospital in Toronto, Canada, between December 2021 and September 2023. Our goal was to find common themes in patient preferences that could inform strategies for future data collection that are both effective and respectful. We explored the settings, timing, and situations where patients feel more comfortable and willing to disclose this information.

Implications

Our findings showed that patients' comfort and willingness to share background information depended on the way the questions were asked, the format used, the type of information requested, and the timing. Hospitals should consider adapting their data-collection practices to better align with patient preferences.

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What is the current situation?

- Sociodemographic factors such as race, income, immigration status, and education can affect the healthcare people receive because of system-wide issues. These issues can include not having the same access to care, feeling unwelcome or misunderstood, or dealing with discrimination. This can lead to unfair differences in health.
- Gathering sociodemographic information from patients can help hospitals to identify these differences and improve services for groups who may be disadvantaged.
- Many patients still feel unsure about sharing personal information because of past discrimination, mistrust, or not knowing how their information will be used.
- There is limited previous research on patient perspectives about the collection of sociodemographic data from patients receiving short-term hospital care.

What did we do?

- We conducted 52 interviews with patients at the General Internal Medicine and Geriatric Medicine units in Toronto, Ontario. These interviews took place between December 2021 and September 2023. We used the data from these interviews to explore how and when patients preferred to be asked questions about their sociodemographic information.
- We used a structured approach to analyze the interview data. The data were compared to identify shared ideas and patterns, which were then developed into themes.

What were the results?

- Patient preferences varied based on the timing of data collection, the format of data collection, the type of question asked, concerns about privacy, and the approach of the data collector.
- Participants felt more comfortable sharing sociodemographic information if:
    - They believed it would lead to better care
    - Data were collected after being admitted to the hospital
    - Data were collected verbally
    - Concerns about privacy were addressed
- Participants felt most uncomfortable when asked about income and race due to concerns surrounding data privacy, discrimination, or lack of relevance.
- There was no preference for which member of the healthcare team collected the data. Participants instead noted the importance of a respectful approach from the data collector.