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Dennis J. Baumgardner

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Recommended Citation
Uncertainty and Competing Priorities in Shared Clinical Decision-Making

Dennis J. Baumgardner, MD | Editor-in-Chief

Department of Family Medicine, Aurora UW Medical Group, Aurora Health Care, Milwaukee, WI

Let’s face it, sometimes even our most carefully considered and skillfully delivered recommendations or care plans are not adopted by our patients. This phenomenon has been variously, and often pejoratively, referred to as “noncompliance” or “nonadherence.” In this issue of Journal of Patient-Centered Research and Reviews, four articles specifically touch on the subject of patient uncertainty or competing priorities that can affect medical decision-making.

Grant and colleagues, in their study of patients with heart failure during the first month following a related hospitalization, reported that some individuals felt uncertainty over their health status and wanted reassurance regarding safe limits to daily activity. They also noted that patient priorities changed over the weeks following discharge.

Similarly Hagan et al, in their novel Twitter chat regarding the needs of women treated for ovarian cancer, discovered uncertainty was common among the patient participants. The authors end their work by advising clinicians: “This vulnerable time in patients’ lives is our opportunity to demonstrate our understanding of their needs and concerns.”

The qualitative study of women with breast atypia by Goff and colleagues found that interviewed women “varied in the extent to which they wished to actively participate in decisions” regarding treatment. Their subjects also self-reported that they had to handle uncertainty regarding increased risk of invasive cancer developing after a diagnosis of atypical hyperplasia or lobular carcinoma in situ.

Finally, in their exploration of what outcomes matter most to hysterectomy patients, Bossick et al concluded that their collective data “suggest a need for increased education and empowerment in the decision-making process.” Several of the included participant quotes implied issues of uncertainty surrounding hysterectomy decisions.

It might be tempting to write off these concerns of uncertainty as merely a byproduct of poor patient-provider communication. Yet absolute certainty in medicine is difficult to achieve. Before any communication can be improved, one must be reasonably confident regarding the information he or she intends to relate.

Among novice and experienced clinicians alike, diagnostic and therapeutic uncertainty is an important issue. It may well be true that there is a general intolerance of uncertainty among some physicians, leading to difficulties in patient care. In fact, there is evidence from over 30 years ago that “only rarely (did) clinical uncertainty present management problems for the doctor.” It may have been rarely identified and likely posed little problem due to the doctor being “in
a position of control” in medical encounters, whereas
the patient was “dependent” or passive.\(^8\)

However, a recent mixed-methods study involving 385
videotaped patient encounters observed that physicians
expressed uncertainty in a fair proportion (12%) of topics discussed in the visits (compared to 20% among patients).\(^9\) This same study indicated that for
both physicians and patients the amount of expressed
uncertainty varied by topic (mental health topics
had the most), and that physicians expressed more
uncertainty with patient-initiated topics compared
to general biomedical topics.\(^9\) Patient uncertainty
is to be anticipated in many chronic conditions, or
even incidental findings, especially if the etiology is
unknown and/or there is a lack of consensus regarding
specific treatment and predictable outcome.\(^10,11\) For at
least some diseases, like prostate cancer, the degree
of uncertainty may vary by ethnic group, age, and
educational level.\(^12\) Unsurprisingly, uncertainty and
the “perception of danger” decreases satisfaction with
treatment outcome.\(^12\)

Recently, Davies and colleagues interviewed persons
who had been living with an incidental thyroid
lesion that was known or suspected to be malignant
for a mean of 3 years.\(^11\) These individuals expressed
uncertainty or questioned the advice they had been
given to intervene to remove or reduce the threat of
cancer. Their experiences included anxiety, “secret
keeping,” isolation, shame, and ostracization.\(^11\) Similar
to the findings of Bossick et al regarding hysterectomy
choices,\(^5\) Dahlerus and colleagues, in their qualitative
study of patients with advanced chronic kidney
disease, found that these individuals wished more
input into dialysis decisions.\(^13\) Some had fear and lack
of conveyed knowledge, if not explicit uncertainty.\(^13\)

Patient priorities at the time of medical decision-making
often have an impact on those decisions. I am reminded
of a small project family medicine residents performed
in our teaching clinics. Based on their knowledge of
the patient’s medical history, the physicians were to
indicate their greatest fear or concern regarding the
patient’s health before entering the room. Not sharing
their concerns, the physician then asked the 94 patients
(82% of whom had at least 1 chronic disease) what
was their greatest fear regarding their health. Patient-
physician concordance was a mere 44% (and only 32%
in those with hypertension). Thus, patients may often
prioritize their chief concerns differently than we do
(Quiroz EM, Kram JJ, Bernhard KA, Ledesma M,
Others have observed that patients with chronic disease
and clinicians may differ regarding priorities and that
such discordance may affect the patient-clinician
relationship.\(^14\) Not surprisingly, these patient priorities
can change over time.\(^14,15\)

Mangin and colleagues noted that person-focused care,
as opposed to disease-focused care or even patient-
centered care, includes “the additional dimension of
care over time, which in the context of multimorbidity
is both essential and requires priority setting as well as
preferences for care.”\(^16\) These authors found a dearth
of tools to assess patient priorities in the primary care
setting. The single useful article identified, in my
opinion, shows promise as a fairly quick and simple
tool to start patient priority conversations during an
office encounter.\(^17\) This report, by Fried et al, describes
a 100-point visual analogue scale on which patients
are asked to rank four possible outcomes: maintaining
independence, staying alive, reducing or eliminating
pain, and reducing or eliminating other symptoms.\(^17\)
Test-retest reliability, however, was fair to poor (which
could, in part, represent changing patient priorities).

Tinetti et al also took up the issue of fragmented,
disease-oriented care in patients with multimorbidity.\(^18\)
They recommend a “re-focus of care … to patient-
priority-directed care,” in which patient outcome goals
are solicited and an examination of the burden/benefit
ratio is undertaken; the authors did acknowledge the
multiple challenges and complexity of this dramatic
paradigm shift.\(^18\)

It has recently been suggested that our electronic
health records (EHR) be redesigned to focus on goal-
directed, rather than problem-focused, health care.\(^19\)
Perhaps with such redesigned EHR, simple office
tools like that proposed by Fried and colleagues,\(^17\)
and the will to practice shared decision-making (a
model “based on choice, option and decision talk”\(^20\)),
clinicians can at least approach person-focused care at
its best. This evolution will naturally incorporate many
of Rosner’s proposed solutions to “noncompliance,”\(^9\)
and likely assist both patient and clinician in facing the uncertainty that often unavoidably occurs during the ever-developing processes of diagnosis and treatment.

One way of addressing uncertainty in medicine is to view the patient-provider exchange as a two-way street. Patients can serve as teachers, as Becker and Seeman point out in their essay within this issue,\(^{21}\) one of myriad reasons why they deserve our greatest care and respect. No doubt they can teach us much about handling uncertainty and their competing priorities. We must ask and listen.

**References**


