Communication skills training in cancer care: where are we and where are we going?

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CRD summary
This review concluded that communication skills training may improve the skills, knowledge and confidence of professionals working with people with cancer. It is uncertain whether training improves stress or patient satisfaction. The authors did not report the review methods in detail and the review covers only a 3-year period, so the reliability of the conclusions is uncertain.

Authors' objectives
To assess the effectiveness of communication skills training programmes designed for cancer health care professionals based on recently published research. The authors were building on published reviews in this area (see Other Publications of Related Interest nos.1-2).

Searching
The authors searched the Web of Knowledge (including Web of Science, PubMed, the Cochrane Library, Current Content Connect, CAB Abstracts, Inspec, POPLINE, ERIC) for studies published in English from January 2002 to February 2005; the search terms were reported.

Study selection
Study designs of evaluations included in the review
The authors did not state what type of studies were eligible for inclusion in the review. Both randomised controlled trials and observational studies were included.

Specific interventions included in the review
Studies that evaluated any type of communication skills training of relevance to cancer health professionals were eligible. A wide range of training programmes were included.

Participants included in the review
Studies of health care professionals working with people with cancer were eligible for inclusion. The participants in the included studies included oncologists, oncology nurses, general practitioners and medical students.

Outcomes assessed in the review
The authors did not state any outcomes that the studies had to include in order to be considered for inclusion. The main outcomes of the review appeared to be improved communication skills and knowledge, satisfaction among health care workers and patients, and stress and burnout.

How were decisions on the relevance of primary studies made?
The authors did not state how the papers were selected for the review, or how many reviewers performed the selection.

Assessment of study quality
The authors did not state that they assessed validity.

Data extraction
The authors did not state how the data were extracted for the review, or how many reviewers performed the data extraction.
Methods of synthesis
How were the studies combined?
The authors tabulated findings from all studies and provided a narrative summary, focusing mainly on the randomised trials.

How were differences between studies investigated?
The authors provided a narrative summary, grouped under headings such as interventions, skills taught, assessment methods and outcomes. Programmes aimed at different groups of health professionals were discussed separately. The authors did not explicitly investigate differences between the studies.

Results of the review
Thirteen studies (described in 22 papers), of which four were randomised trials, were included. The bulk of the analysis focused on the randomised trials.

Training skills programmes were associated with reported improvements in communication skills, increased knowledge and confidence, changes in attitudes, and satisfaction among health care professionals. There was no change in the physicians’ detection of patient distress. Findings about the effects of training on participant stress and ‘burnout’ were inconsistent.

Two of the four studies that focused on patient outcomes reported improved satisfaction and perception of interviews.

Authors’ conclusions
Communication skills training programmes are useful for health professionals working in cancer care.

CRD commentary
This review focused on recently published research. This meant that it did not provide a summary of all studies on this topic, only those published within a 3-year period. The inclusion criteria were broad and not always well defined. The search strategy appeared appropriate to fulfil the authors’ stated aims, but unpublished studies and those in languages other than English were excluded so we cannot be sure that all relevant studies were summarised. The authors did not describe how the studies were selected or assessed for relevance or validity. This makes it difficult to draw conclusions about the quality of the review or the studies on which it was based.

Since the studies included were heterogeneous in design and focus, it was appropriate to provide a narrative summary. It also appeared appropriate to focus on the highest quality studies but, given this was the case, it might have been appropriate to limit the inclusion criteria to randomised studies.

It is difficult to comment on the usefulness and reliability of the review since it focused on a narrow timeframe and many of the review methods were not described in any detail. The authors’ conclusions may be overly confident given that they are based on a small number of studies and a limited timeframe.

Implications of the review for practice and research
Practice: The authors stated that communication skills training programmes should be developed for nurses and physicians working with people with cancer and their families. To be effective, training should include learner-centred, skills focused and practice-orientated techniques; use small group work; and be at least 3 days in duration. These conclusions are likely to have been drawn from the totality of evidence on this topic, rather than the narrow review presented here.

Research: The authors stated that future studies should assess how the addition of new techniques may increase the effectiveness of training; explore how people learn new communication skills; examine the impact of training whole teams; and include more participant- and patient-based outcomes.
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Other publications of related interest

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This is a critical abstract of a systematic review that meets the criteria for inclusion on DARE. Each critical abstract contains a brief summary of the review methods, results and conclusions followed by a detailed critical assessment on the reliability of the review and the conclusions drawn.