

# The impact of breaking bad news on oncologist burnout and how communication skills can help: A scoping review

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## Introduction

- ❖ Oncologists frequently encounter highly stressful situations, from breaking bad news to addressing topics such as death, dying, and palliative care
- ❖ Breaking bad news is a particularly complex communication task
- ❖ Discomfort surrounding the disclosure of negative information may contribute to higher burnout rates among oncologists relative to other medical specialties
- ❖ Improving communication skills among oncologists has been identified as an effective means to reduce burnout

## Objective

- ❖ To review the impact that breaking bad news may have on oncologists, and how enhancing communication skills when breaking bad news may help reduce burnout

## Methods

- ❖ A literature search of Cochrane Central, Embase, and Medline was conducted
- ❖ Studies were included if:
  - The primary subjects were oncologists
  - One of the primary causes of oncologist burnout discussed was breaking bad news
  - Both the impact of breaking bad news on oncologist burnout and the effect of communication skills on burnout were reported
- ❖ All non-original research, including literature reviews, editorials, and commentaries were excluded

## Results

- ❖ Out of 106 identified hits, four studies were deemed eligible for inclusion
- ❖ Communication skills:
  - 3 of 4 studies used a communication skills training (CST) program to assess the impact of these skills on reducing oncologist burnout
    - ❑ Programs included the use of didactic lectures, role play managed by facilitators, and discussions to teach the impact of communication between patients and oncologists, and skills associated with breaking bad news
    - ❑ The S.P.I.K.E.S. model, a six-step protocol for breaking bad news to cancer patients regarding their illness was used
  - One study used a questionnaire-based survey, in which participants were asked to assess whether they considered themselves sufficiently trained in communication skills
- ❖ Oncologist burnout:
  - All four studies used the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) to measure oncologist burnout
    - ❑ The MBI is a highly reliable and valid instrument used to measure burnout, and consists of three subscales: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment
  - Comparison of the pre- and post-intervention outcome
    - ❑ Emotional exhaustion decreased in two studies, increased in one study, and no significant difference was found in one study
    - ❑ Depersonalization decreased in three studies, and no significant changes were found in one study
    - ❑ Personal accomplishment increased in two studies, decreased in one study, and no significant changes were found in one study

## Discussion

- ❖ The responsibility faced by oncologists to break bad news to their patients can result in burnout
- ❖ The overall assessment of CST showed varied yet positive responses
- ❖ Trends on how communication skills were taught note the importance of both providing an opportunity to learn about communication skills in a formal manner, and providing a chance to practice the skills learned through specific, simulated scenarios
- ❖ The S.P.I.K.E.S. model is popular among CST programs and known to increase oncologists' confidence in the ability to deliver unfavourable medical information to their patients
- ❖ The questionnaire-based survey proved useful in determining oncologists' own perceptions of whether they feel they have received sufficient training in communication skills

## Conclusion

- ❖ Burnout is frequently characterized by feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low personal accomplishment
- ❖ In oncology, the practice of breaking bad news to patients has been identified as a source of burnout
- ❖ Enhancing communication skills to assist in improving the way negative information is disclosed can provide oncologists with skills to mitigate stress and ultimately reduce burnout

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