

Clinical Empathy: The Opportunity to Offer Optimal Treatment to People with Serious Illness

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Abstract : Empirical data in health psychology studies show the necessity to consider the doctor-patient communication and its positive impact on outcomes such as patients' satisfaction, treatment adherence, physical and psychological wellbeing. In this line, the present research aims to define the role and determinants of an effective doctor-patient communication during the treatment of patients with serious illness (peritoneal carcinomatosis). We carried out a prospective longitudinal study including patients treated for peritoneal carcinomatosis of various origins. From November 2016, to date, data were collected using validated questionnaires at two times of evaluation: one month before the surgery (T0) and one month after (T1). Thus, patients reported their (a) anxiety and depression levels, (b) standardized and individualized quality of life and (c) how they perceived communication, attitude and empathy of the surgeon. 105 volunteer patients (Mean age = 58.18 years, SD = 10.24, 62.2% female) participated to the study. PC arose from rare diseases (14%), colorectal (38%), eso-gastric (24%) and ovarian (8%) cancer. Three groups are defined according to the severity of their pathology and the treatment offered to them: (1) important surgical treatment with the goal of healing (53%), (2) repeated palliative surgical treatment (17%), and (3) the patients recused for surgical treatment, only palliative approach (30%). Results are presented according to Baron and Kenny recommendations. The regressions analyses show that only depression and anxiety are sensitive to the communication and empathy of surgeon. The main results show that a good communication and high level of empathy at T0 and T1 limit depression and anxiety of the patients in T1. Results also indicate that the severity of the disease modulates this positive impact of communication: better is the communication the less are the level of depression and anxiety of the patients. This effect is higher for patients treated for the more severe disease. These results confirm that, even in the case severe disease a good communication between patient and physician remains a significant factor in promoting the well-being of patients. More specific training need to be developed to promote empathic care.

Keywords : clinical empathy, determinants, healthcare, psychological wellbeing

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