

LOW VISION REHABILITATION

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Should ophthalmologists receive communication skills training in breaking bad news?

Peter A. Zakrzewski, Adelyn L. Ho, Rosa Braga-Mele

Purpose: To gauge the opinions of the Canadian ophthalmology community on whether formal communication skills training (CST) in breaking bad news (BBN) should be incorporated into the training of ophthalmologists.

Methods: An online survey was offered by email to all members of the Canadian Ophthalmological Society with registered email addresses (n=800). Survey questions focused on two specific BBN scenarios: (S1) disclosing to a patient that he/she has suffered permanent vision loss; and (S2) revoking a patient's driver's licence due to visual limitations. The main outcome measures were respondents' opinions on the need for and benefit of CST in BBN in the training of ophthalmologists, and the optimal point(s) in training and format(s) for the CST in BBN.

Results: 225 of 800 potential respondents completed the survey (28% response rate). Although the majority felt prepared when delivering bad news to patients (S1: 91%, mean 5-point Likert score 4.16; S2: 78%, 4.03), only about half felt comfortable doing so (S1: 51%, 3.27; S2: 47%, 3.24). The vast majority believed that it is important for ophthalmologists to be able to communicate effectively when breaking bad news (S1: 99%, 4.81; S2: 97%, 4.73), CST in BBN would be beneficial for both future ophthalmologists (S1: 88%, 4.28; S2: 87%, 4.24) and patients (S1: 92%, 4.26; S2: 87%, 4.24), and CST in BBN should be included in the training of ophthalmologists (87%, 4.27 for S1; 83%, 4.15 for S2). Residency was the preferred point in training for the CST (95% for both scenarios), but there was no consensus on what type of training format(s) to use.

Conclusions: The Canadian ophthalmology community strongly supports the inclusion of formal CST in BBN during ophthalmology residency. BBN is a vital skill for physicians that has been associated with more desirable patient outcomes. CST in BBN would be a logical choice of content for ophthalmology residency programs striving to meet the "interpersonal and communication skills" core competency requirements mandated by accreditation bodies in Canada and the United States.