

Journal Watch

A randomized, controlled trial of physician postures when breaking bad news to cancer patients

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Abstract: Medical training teaches physicians to sit when breaking bad news, though there have been no controlled studies to support this advice. We aimed to establish cancer patients' preference for physician posture when physicians break bad news using a randomized controlled crossover trial in a department of palliative care at a large US cancer center. Referred patients were blind to the hypothesis and watched video sequences of a sitting or standing physician breaking bad news to a cancer patient and 168 of 173 participants (88 female) completed the study. Sitting physicians were preferred and viewed as significantly more compassionate than standing physicians ($P < 0.0001$) but other physician attributes and behaviours were generally rated as of equal or more importance than posture. In summary, cancer patients, especially females, prefer physicians to sit when breaking bad news and rate physicians who adopt this posture as more compassionate. However, sitting posture alone is unlikely to compensate for poor communication skills and lack of other respectful gestures during a consultation. *Palliative Medicine* 2007; **21**: 501–505

Strengths:

- The trial was well designed and well conducted.
- Patients had a wide variety of cancer diagnoses that had been deemed incurable, and therefore were similar to the patients seen by the Palliative Care team.

Weaknesses:

- The video consisted of a staged and hypothetical situation and therefore the patients' reactions may not be realistic.
- There was a significant order effect, in which a significant number preferred the second physician to the first regardless of posture. This effect weakens the statistics of their conclusion that patients preferred sitting posture, but also raises the point that perhaps physicians need to break bad news multiple times.
- The video that the patients based their preferences on was not available to the reader, thus we cannot judge video quality or physician qualities other than posture that were said to be controlled.

Relevance to Palliative Care:

- This paper provides evidence for the mantra taught in medical school that patients prefer their physician to be seated when breaking bad news. However it also found that palliative care cancer patients value qualities such as time spent, warmth, patience, caring and respect more than seated posture, reminding us that the contents of the conversation and our delivery technique are more valued than posture.