



Research paper

Communication during radiation therapy education sessions: The role of medical jargon and emotional support in clarifying patient confusion



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ABSTRACT

Objective: Radiation oncology consultations involve explanation of complex technical concepts using medical jargon. This study aimed to: analyse types and frequency of medical jargon that radiation therapists (RTs) use during education sessions; identify how patients seek clarification from RTs; and, explore RTs communication strategies.

Methods: Education sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Medical jargon was analysed using MaxDictio (a vocabulary analysis programme). A distinction was made between *specialised* (specialised terms used in RT or cancer) and *contextual* jargon (common everyday words with a different meaning in RT). Qualitative data were analysed using Framework analysis.

Results: Fifty-eight patients and 10 RTs participated. Contextual treatment jargon were the most frequently used jargon (32.2%) along with general medical terms (34.6%). Patients appeared uncertain about the number of treatments, side effects, and the risks of radiation. Patients sought clarification by asking RTs to explain or repeat information. RTs replaced jargon with a simpler word, used everyday analogies, and diagrams.

Conclusion: Use of medical jargon is common in RT education sessions. RTs used different jargon types to varying degrees, but contextual jargon dominated.

Practice implications: Training RTs how to tailor information to enhance patients' understanding would be beneficial. Future research exploring medical jargon used in other (non-) oncology settings is required.

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1. Introduction

The first day of radiation therapy treatment is a time of high anxiety for many patients [1]. However, they are less anxious when information is effectively communicated [2]. Use of technical language and unclarified medical jargon to explain information [3] may lead to misunderstanding or misinterpretation [4]. Terms used in cancer care, such as 'remission' and 'seedlings', [5] are commonly misunderstood by patients and may lead to confusion and fear [4].

Radiation therapy involves the need to explain complex technical concepts to patients who are likely to be unfamiliar with much of the terminology used. Radiation therapists (RTs) play an important role in information provision and providing emotional support to patients. Patients are less likely to be anxious and experience emotional distress when information is clearly communicated with minimal jargon and tailored to their level of understanding [6]. In turn, patients are more likely to have a better understanding of what daily treatment involves and manage their treatment-related side effects effectively. RTs report using a range of communication strategies to help patients, who they perceive have difficulties understanding, such as using analogies (e.g. radiation is like a light bulb) to communicate

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complex concepts and address misconceptions surrounding treatment [7]. However, little is known about how RTs actually communicate with patients during education sessions, the frequency of medical jargon used by RTs, or the strategies used to clarify information and alleviate concerns.

The current study aimed to: (1) analyse the frequency and types of medical jargon used by RTs during pre-treatment audio-recorded psycho-education sessions on first day of treatment; (2) identify how patients seek clarification of information from RTs; and (3) explore strategies that RTs use to enhance patient understanding of treatment-related concepts and provide emotional support.

2. Methodology

2.1. Design

This is a prospective observational study exploring the frequency of medical jargon use and communication exchange between patients, caregivers (when present), and RTs during psycho-education sessions delivered on the first day of treatment. It was conducted at a metropolitan teaching hospital in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Sydney and the hospital.

2.2. Participants

Participants were eligible if they were aged 18 years or over, were able to give written consent and had sufficient English. Patients were ineligible if they had received prior radiation therapy or their RT did not consent to participate. Caregivers present in sessions gave verbal consent to recording conversations. Ten RTs consented to participate.

2.3. Procedure

Eligible patients were approached and invited to participate at the initial planning/simulation appointment, usually one week prior to their education session and first treatment. Consenting patients were administered a demographic questionnaire completed as a face-to-face interview with the researcher (SD). Consenting RTs, delivering the psycho-education sessions, completed a paper-based demographic questionnaire. The education session was then audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were analysed using quantitative and qualitative methods.

2.4. Analysis

2.4.1. Development of medical jargon coding schema

For the purposes of the study medical jargon was defined as: *any word or phrase that appears opaque to individuals lacking medical training and/or exposure* [4].

The authors (LS, SS, HD, JS, HS) carefully read several transcripts to identify medical terms that potentially met the generic definition of jargon used by RTs during the pre-treatment education sessions. The authors then met to compare and contrast the jargon terms identified, and to discuss how the different types of jargon could be coded. This was a rigorous, iterative and inductive process whereby the authors re-read transcripts and met on a regular basis to develop the medical jargon coding schema. During the development of the schema, it became apparent that the broad definition of medical jargon did not adequately describe the different contexts that jargon may be used. We therefore coded the data and identified medical language categories (dictionaries) that words could be placed into. A number of common words used in everyday life were identified to have a different meaning in the context of radiation therapy and oncology (e.g. camera, bed). We made the distinction between *specialised* and *contextual* jargon to better characterise how medical terminology is used in radiation oncology. Specialised jargon refers to specialised terms or words used in radiation therapy or for cancer in general (e.g. seed, simulator). Contextual jargon denotes everyday common terms or words that have a different meaning when they are used in radiation therapy or for cancer in general (e.g. mask, tattoo, couch). A RT was also consulted to advise on how medical words should be categorised into the different dictionaries. The final medical jargon coding schema comprised eight broad medical language categories (Table 1).

2.5. Quantitative analysis using MaxDictio

The frequency and type of medical jargon were analysed using a specialised vocabulary analysis software (MaxDictio) using a similar methodology as described by Carpenter et al. [8].

- i A total word frequency list was generated counting the total number of words spoken by RTs in the 58 sessions.
- ii Non-jargon words and symbols were removed, including numbers, names and initials, sounds, contractions, unrelated or colloquial words.
- iii Words listed in the Dale–Chall Word List (list of simple English words) [9] and New General Service List (NGSL, a list of vocabulary important to learners of English as a foreign language) [10] were also excluded.
- iv Questionable jargon, words debatable for jargon categorisation, were discussed. Discrepancies in whether a word was considered jargon or not, or how a jargon word should be categorised, were discussed and subsequently reviewed by an RT until consensus was reached.
- v A final word frequency list of jargon words was derived.

Table 1

Final medical jargon coding schema and terminology categories.

Jargon Category	Examples of jargon words	No. of jargon words in each category
(1) Cancer/oncology	Tumour, oncologist	21
(2) Specialised jargon in relation to 'radiation therapy treatment'	Radiation, mastectomy	14
(3) Contextual jargon in relation to 'radiation therapy treatment'	Episodes, dose	26
(4) Specialised jargon in relation to 'radiation therapy devices/equipment'	Electrons, seeds	10
(5) Contextual jargon in relation to 'radiation therapy devices/equipment'	Beam, gown	60
(6) Imaging techniques/types and investigations	Mammogram, MRI	12
(7) General side effects	Fatigue, nausea	29
(8) General medical terms	Therapist, antibiotic	48

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