



Assessment

Medical assessments of patient decisions and health literacy. A scenario-based measure of judgment skills



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ABSTRACT

Objective: To design a measure of judgment skills (a dimension within the wider concept of health literacy) that assesses patient decisions with a scenario-based measure in the context of sleeping disorders; more specifically to provide a basis for the professional medical evaluation of patient decisions to be employed in the measure; and in a wider sense to explore in which way knowledge about insomnia, self-management and autonomous decision-making are affecting insomnia patients and their health outcomes.

Methods: A three-round Delphi-study was conducted with an expert panel of three sleep specialists and 26 general practitioners to rate scenarios of patient decision problems and find a consensus in ranking the answer options from a medical perspective.

Results: A consensus emerged among the medical experts about the measure, which could be further improved with regard to the scenarios and the answer options. Scenarios were rated as realistic and the answer options ranked with a high agreement.

Conclusion: The 16 scenarios with four ranked answer options each provide a valid measure for patients' judgment skills within the wider concept of health literacy.

Practical implications: The proposed judgment skills measure is ready to be pre-tested with insomnia patients, and a validation study can be conducted.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this research is to develop and validate a novel measure of patient judgment skills, an important dimension of the health literacy concept. The measure will employ scenarios and answer options, which allow assessing whether a person makes medically sound decisions, and proves in this way good judgment skill. Such valuation requires a professional medical assessment of the behaviors formulated in the answer options. This article, in particular, reports how the scenarios and answer options developed for the measure was determined by medical experts.

Health literacy is established as a central concept in health communication and education. Research shows that it has a strong influence on communication in medical settings [1] and consequences for the patients' health outcomes [2–4]. The necessity of the concept of health literacy as a link between communication and better health outcomes is demonstrated in the fact that low health literacy levels are a better predictor of an individual's health than the classical socio-demographic variables of age, income,

education, employment status, and race [5]. Health literacy is a relevant factor for the functioning of the communication between doctors and patients. It is based on the underlying concept of literacy [6], and defined by the US Institute of Medicine as:

the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions [7].

The concept of health literacy is widely used for measuring the patients' abilities to obtain, process, and communicate information about their health condition, and lately major work in defining and theory-building has been done [8–11]. A comprehensive model of health literacy was proposed by Schulz and Nakamoto [12,13]. To address the patient centeredness and the critical component of the concept of health literacy, Schulz and Nakamoto added judgment skills to the concept, retaining the other components of functional health literacy, declarative knowledge, and procedural knowledge [14]. While these components are theorized in a functional and knowledge-based way, the notion of judgment skills opens new possibilities for a less limited conceptualization of health literacy [11]. Attention to judgment skills is driven by the idea that a patient, in new situations regarding the disease, needs to make autonomous decisions based on knowledge, personal competence,

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and practical intelligence in general. All these factors affect patient decisions and health outcomes and are seen as tacit knowledge necessary for adequate behavior in a given medical situation [15]. By definition judgment skills are the ability of patients to make sound autonomous medical decisions and to manage their condition with the distinct developed knowledge. Judgment skills are conceptualized theoretically as patient decisions. The conceptualization takes their impact on the personal health outcome into consideration and is linked to the individual cognitive and behavioral capabilities. This means that patients decide according to their previous knowledge and experience in dealing with similar medical situations and developing routines and coping strategies. The decision is situation-specific and influenced by factors that relate to empowerment and components of health literacy other than judgment skills [16,17].

Validated measures for the functional and knowledge components of health literacy already exist with the TOFHLA or the REALM and are widely recognized [18,19], but for the notion of patients' judgment skills as conceptualized before no measures exist at present.

To measure a person's ability to make sound autonomous health decisions, an approach based on scenarios and answer options was chosen. This methodology presents scenarios that require a decision, and answer options, asking respondents to pick one of them as their individual decision. To assess the quality of the options (and thus of the decision a patient makes) a Delphi study with medical experts was conducted, which is the focus of this article. Box 1 shows the 16 scenarios as they emerged from the Delphi study. Previous attempts in the field of health literacy inspired this research, thus the scenarios are based on different considerations. Previous studies have worked with more general (i.e. not domain-specific) items to evaluate the appropriateness of decisions, which are an element of critical health literacy [20–22]. To capture individual judgments in other domains than health, scenario-based approaches have been used, such as in work psychology [23]. The scenario technique was adapted to patients' medical judgment skills in the study as reported in this article.

In this research, judgment skills are applied to the particular medical setting of primary insomnia [24]. About one third of the world population is suffering from insomnia in a given year [25,26]. In the study area, the Canton of Ticino, Switzerland, the rate of people suffering from sleeping disorders is even higher (39.8%) [27]. But not only is the sleeping quality affected, insomnia patients also suffer grave daytime impairments which can result in difficulties in social life and at work. Most of the time, insomnia patients have to decide on their own how to react toward their medical condition within certain circumstances. The decision will have an effect on their condition. Due to its high prevalence and the importance of everyday decisions for coping with the condition, insomnia is an ideal field for studying patient judgment skills.

2. Methods

In order to develop a scenario/answer option measure of judgment skills, the medical evaluation of the behaviors described in the answer options must be known. Therefore medical experts need to be directly involved in appraising the options with their specialized knowledge and their daily medical practice. As diverging appraisals cannot legitimately be used for assessing patient decisions, a method was chosen that is suitable for establishing expert consensus: a Delphi study, in this case in three consecutive rounds.

The Delphi method is often used to find a consensus among a panel of experts by consulting them over several rounds and showing them the results of the previous round until a satisfactory overall consensus is reached [28–34]. To find a systematic

Box 1. The 16 scenarios presented in the judgment skills measure

- 1 The doctor prescribed you a medicine for insomnia. Although sticking to the medical regime you can't fall asleep. How would you react?
- 2 For several nights you can't sleep properly. What would you do?
- 3 Your medication works best when you reduce the consumption of sleep-active substances. You are at a party where everyone drinks alcohol, and you are offered an alcoholic drink, too. What would you do?
- 4 You are in the bed for more than half an hour and cannot fall asleep. The next day you have an important meeting with your boss/an important family event. What would you do?
- 5 Friends tell you about a new insomnia medication and their positive experience. How would you react?
- 6 In the media you heard of a new complementary medicine and household remedies against insomnia. What would you do?
- 7 A friend tells you about the positive effect of a certain medication, but your doctor doesn't want to give you a prescription. What would you do?
- 8 You realize that your sleeping disorders disturb your bed partner's sleep. What would you do?
- 9 Your doctor prescribes you a strong medicine for sleeping disorders. You should use this medicine only when your normal medication doesn't help and you had more than three nights with complaints. You couldn't sleep the night before, and the next day you have an important meeting. What would you do?
- 10 A friend or family member of yours has had problems falling asleep for several nights and staying awake during the day. He is close to the end of his tether and asks you for an over-the-counter medicine, to find some sleep and feel better finally. What would you do?
- 11 As you had sleeping problems, you went to your doctor. The doctor asked you about your personal situation, your work-place setting, and your general medical condition. He talks to you about managing insomnia without medication and doesn't give you a prescription. How would you react?
- 12 On a trip you stop by at a pharmacy, as you need some medication against headache. You realize that you also need a refill of your prescribed insomnia medication, but left your prescription at home. The pharmacist asks you for your prescription. How would you react?
- 13 During the day it's difficult for you to stay awake. You suffer of daytime fatigue or sleepiness. But as you have an appointment in the evening, you want to look refreshed. What would you do?
- 14 For some time you have been taking an insomnia medication that contains benzodiazepine. These days this medication doesn't work very well for you. The doctor told you to stick to your medical regime, but you know that overdosing benzodiazepine somewhat is not dangerous. What would you do in order to find finally some sleep?
- 15 You are planning a weekend trip with friends. As there are a limited number of rooms in the hotel, you have to share a room with someone else. What would you do to avoid your room-mate being disturbed by your sleeping problems?
- 16 At the moment you have difficulties to fall asleep. A friend or family member currently takes an insomnia medicine, which works well. Since you have sleeping problems yourself these days, what would you do?

approach in designing a measure, the Delphi method is helpful in bringing knowledge from different experts together and in making use of their "judgment function" [32]. Anonymity, a comment function, and a feedback possibility are characteristics of this method, ensuring the panel of experts to share their professional opinion with researchers. By presenting the experts the results of the previous round in the follow-up, they are offered a chance to think the problem through and change their opinion. Furthermore uncertainties can be removed and issues mentioned in the comments can be discussed.

General practitioners were included along with more specialized sleep expert, as patients will usually first approach their general practitioner with sleep-related problems. The views of the two groups of experts were not simply lumped together, but considered separately and compared. No deviations of general practitioners' views from the sleep experts' were ever observed over the three rounds. Online questionnaires were employed, allowing to contact the experts residing at some distance easily,

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