

Communication Skills Training in Ophthalmology: Results of a Needs Assessment and Pilot Training Program

Anuradha Mishra, MD, MSHPEd, FRCSC,^{*,1} David Browning, MSW, LICSW,[†]
Miriam J. Haviland, MSPH,[‡] Mary Lou Jackson, MD,[§] Donna Luff, PhD,[†]
Elaine C. Meyer, MA, PhD, BSN, RN,^{†,||} Katherine Talcott, MD,^{*,2} and Carolyn E. Kloek, MD*

*Department of Ophthalmology, Mass Eye and Ear, Boston, Massachusetts; [†]Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, Institute for Professionalism and Ethical Practice, Landmark Center, Boston, Massachusetts; [‡]Department of Epidemiology, Boston University School of Public Health, Boston, Massachusetts; [§]University of British Columbia Eye Care Centre (VGH), Boston Children's Hospital, Vancouver, British Columbia; and ^{||}Department of Psychiatry at Boston Children's Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts

OBJECTIVE: To conduct a needs assessment to identify gaps in communication skills training in ophthalmology residency programs and to use these results to pilot a communication workshop that prepares residents for difficult conversations.

DESIGN: A mixed-methods design was used to perform the needs assessment. A pre- and postsurvey was administered to workshop participants.

SETTING: Mass Eye and Ear Infirmary, Harvard Medical School (HMS), Department of Ophthalmology.

PARTICIPANTS: HMS ophthalmology residents from post-graduate years 2-4 participated in the needs assessment and the workshop. Ophthalmology residency program directors in the United States participated in national needs assessment.

METHODS: Ophthalmology program directors across the United States were queried on their perception of resident communication skills training through an online survey. A targeted needs assessment in the form of a narrative exercise captured resident perspectives on communication in ophthalmology from HMS residents. A group of HMS residents

participated in the pilot workshop and a pre- and postsurvey was administered to participants to assess its effectiveness.

RESULTS: The survey of program directors yielded a response rate of 40%. Ninety percent of respondents agreed that the communication skills training in their programs could be improved. Fifteen of 24 residents (62%) completed the needs assessment. Qualitative analysis of the narrative material revealed four themes; (1) differing expectations, (2) work role and environment, (3) challenges specific to ophthalmology, and (4) successful strategies adopted. Nine residents participated in the workshop. There was a significant improvement post-workshop in resident reported scores on their ability to manage their emotions during difficult conversations ($p = 0.03$).

CONCLUSIONS: There is an opportunity to improve communication skills training in ophthalmology residency through formalized curriculum. (J Surg Ed ■■■■-■■■. © 2017 Association of Program Directors in Surgery. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.)

KEY WORDS: communication, ophthalmology, empathy, graduate medical training

COMPETENCIES: Interpersonal and Communication Skills

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Correspondence: Inquiries to Carolyn E. Kloek, MD, Mass Eye and Ear Hospital, 243 Charles Street, Boston, MA 02114; e-mail: Carolyn_kloek@meei.harvard.edu

¹ Present address: Dalhousie University, 2035-2 West Victoria Building, 1276 South Park Street, Halifax, NS, Canada B3H 2Y9.

² Present address: Wills Eye Hospital, 840 Walnut Street, Suite 1020, Philadelphia, PA 19107.

INTRODUCTION

The Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) has made communication skills one of the 6 core competencies in which all residents must be taught and assessed during residency training, and deemed competent in by

graduation. In addition, interpersonal and communication skills represent 4 of the 24 milestones in ophthalmology.¹

Most ophthalmologists break bad news to patients in the course of their clinical practice; discussing situations of guarded visual prognosis, diagnosing visual field loss, proposing a procedure to treat an ophthalmic disease, or in explaining a surgical complication to a patient. These discussions can set the tone for how a patient will view, respond to, and cope with a new ophthalmic diagnosis.² Conducting these difficult conversations requires empathy, clarity, and realism coupled with optimism; a balance of qualities that is difficult to strike, but nonetheless teachable and achievable.²⁻⁴ Moreover, the physician needs to recognize and manage not only the patient's emotions in the course of these difficult conversations, but also his or her own emotions and anxiety, which have been shown to play a critical role in the effectiveness of these discussions.^{2,5}

Communication skills training programs have been well studied in the oncology literature. A set of principles for the effective teaching of communication skills in oncology have been defined, including: establishing clear definitions of effective verbal and nonverbal communication skills, observation of learners practicing communication skills such as role-play, feedback to the learner, use of video and audio recordings to promote reflection, repeated practice, and small group learning facilitated by experienced educators.⁶⁻⁹ However, there have been few studies looking at communication skills training programs in ophthalmology.^{3,4}

The objectives of this study were to conduct a needs assessment to identify the need for communication skills training in ophthalmology residency programs at both the national level from the perspective of residency program directors as well as a targeted needs assessment within a large academic residency program. Additionally, we aimed to use the results of this needs assessment to design and pilot a simulation-based, experiential communication skills workshop in ophthalmology.¹⁰⁻¹²

METHODS

This project was deemed to be exempt by the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary (MEEI) institutional review board.

I. Needs Assessment

A mixed-methods approach was used to perform a needs assessment on communication skills training in ophthalmology training programs. The needs assessment focused on 2 sources of data, (1) the broad perspective of ophthalmology residency program directors in the United States through a national survey and (2) the perspectives of residents in a single residency program through a narrative exercise.

A. National Needs Assessment: The Ophthalmology Residency Program Director Survey

To capture a broad perspective on resident communication skills, we sent a survey to all American ophthalmology residency program directors. The survey was administered via SurveyMonkey.

Program directors were asked to provide demographic information and queried on their perception of resident communication training in 3 major areas:

- 1) Resident preparation for difficult conversations
- 2) Resident barriers to having difficult conversations
- 3) Communication skills training curriculum at their institution.

Analysis. Data were analyzed using SAS version 9.4 (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC). Data from the survey are presented as *n* (%) or median (interquartile range).

B. Targeted Needs Assessment: The Resident Narrative

A targeted needs assessment was performed to better understand the resident learning needs. Residents in the Harvard Medical School (HMS) ophthalmology program were invited to complete a narrative exercise to explore communication challenges they encountered during residency.

The residents were asked to complete an anonymous, narrative reflection exercise, which consisted of written responses to three statements:

- 1) *Think back over your experiences in ophthalmology residency. Tell us a story about a conversation that you found particularly challenging. It could be with a patient, family member, or colleague.*
- 2) *After you have written your story, please reflect for a moment on what went well in the conversation and what you found challenging.*
- 3) *Please list what challenges you find with communication in ophthalmology.*

The exercise was administered through SurveyMonkey and residents who completed the exercise were compensated with a gift card for their time and effort.

Participants. All 24 HMS ophthalmology residents from postgraduate years 2-4 were invited to complete the narrative exercise. Demographic data was not collected as part of the exercise to ensure anonymity given the program size.

Analysis. The narratives were analyzed according to the principles of thematic analysis.¹³ Two coders D.L. and A.M. (a sociologist and an ophthalmologist) independently reviewed the narrative data to generate the initial codes. The 2 coders then met to share, reconcile, and refine the code

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