

Foreword

There is growing recognition throughout the medical and scientific research community that an interdisciplinary approach to cancer prevention and control should incorporate patient-centered communication to maximize the benefit of current medical discoveries in diagnosis and treatment—particularly in the emerging era of personalized medicine. Although patient-clinician communication research traditionally has focused on outcomes such as patient satisfaction, comprehension, and adjustment, we need to strengthen our understanding of how these impact health behaviors and disease outcomes. As emphasized in the recent NCI-designated cancer center directors’ report, *Accelerating Success against Cancer*, “Patient-provider communications play a critical role in determining who will engage in health-enhancing lifestyles that reduce cancer risk. They impact the likelihood that a person at risk for cancer will seek and engage in appropriate screening, and they also determine whether appropriate pharmacotherapies are used, and used appropriately to effectively blend with critical behavioral and lifestyle changes.”

Highlighting the need to integrate social, psychological, and communication research with biomedical research, *NCI’s Strategic Plan for Leading the Nation* calls for

research assessing the delivery and impact of patient-centered communication across the cancer care continuum, as well as innovative measurement approaches and study designs to help monitor and track the success of communication efforts over the course of the patient, family, and health care provider experience.

Since its creation in 1997, the Division of Cancer Control at the NCI has played an important leadership role in this essential area of research. Originally under the leadership of Dr. Barbara Rimer (now at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), we funded a major research initiative, the Centers of Excellence in Cancer Communication Research, and a new surveillance tool, the Health Information National Trends Survey. As we celebrate the 10-year anniversary of the division and identify research priorities for the future, we continue to emphasize research on communication that is customized to patients’ needs. To further our goals in this direction, we commissioned the following monograph, *Patient-Centered Communication in Cancer Care: Promoting Healing and Reducing Suffering*.

Authors Ronald Epstein and Richard Street, Jr, propose a conceptual framework and describe the state of the science in patient-centered communication,

noting several gaps in the research and the need to improve and diversify study designs and methods. Their thoughtful analysis challenges the research community to undertake more ambitious studies of communication processes that address the temporal and contextual complexities of cancer care over the course of treatment and survivorship. This will require the development and use of more sophisticated measurement and analysis techniques, and NCI remains committed to supporting this essential work.

Understanding how to optimize the communication process between patients/family and the health care delivery team is essential to our goal of reducing the burden of cancer. We look forward to continued collaboration with researchers and practitioners to improve patient-centered cancer communication strategies and hope that this monograph will help to inform your own work in communication science.

Robert T. Croyle, PhD
Director
Division of Cancer Control and
Population Sciences
National Cancer Institute