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'Psycho-Oncology Online': A New Approach In Psycho-Oncology Service Strategy

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Background

The number of e-health consultancy is permanently increasing. Patients don't depend on a stressful physician office, feel more in control and less ashamed to disclose their problems in the anonymous internet-space. Despite this knowledge there is no 'German speaking' psycho-oncology e-health service. The purpose of our project was to develop a web-based instrument that helps cancer patients and their families to identify their psycho-social problems and receive suitable and direct help.

Method

In a 2years developmental phase 120 cases were collected and scripted into 15 manuscripts that describe cancer patients' typical concerns and psychological burdens. The manuscripts were categorized in 5 'burden profiles': anxiety, depression, fatigue, sexuality and long-term problems, each profile in three severity grades. Professional actors transformed the manuscripts into realistic 'patient video diaries'. Each diary was commented by an expert. In a pre-evaluation 80 out-patients and 130 survivors were interviewed exploring their experience with the instrument. Results were used to develop an online questionnaire based on the emerging themes: acceptance, identification, compliance to expert comment and benefits.

Results

The videos are accepted by 87% of the patients. They have no difficulties to identify with the demonstrated burdens although the protagonists differ from age, sex or cancer diagnose. The majority of the patients expressed a strong preference for learning about psycho-social distress and interventions through the internet. Patients felt widely informed about the benefits of psycho-oncology and 76% realized that they had severe problems and were willing to follow the advice of the experts. 15% were even motivated to start a psychotherapy. The total group reported a reduction of the feeling of hopeless- and helplessness.

Conclusions

Although the current policy in Germany recommends to receive psycho-social support in specialized council centers, this study strongly provides evidence for the high potential of a web-based patient-centered psycho-oncology service, its' benefits for patients as well as the need for it. In March 2013 the main evaluation of our website started as a randomized trial at 10 oncology centers in Germany including 5.000 patients and families. End of the year, the study will provide a huge database to intensively analyze questions in concern of e-health services in psycho-oncology.

Research Implications

There are only a few studies of web-and video-based interventions and online counseling in psycho-oncology. Furthermore, 'Psycho-Oncology Online' is the first German e-health project in psycho-oncology that focuses on psychological burdening without referring to a special cancer diagnose or

group. This pioneering approach provides a broad range of possibilities for future research on diagnostics in the field of psycho-oncology.

Clinical Implications

Psychotherapists, specialized in psycho-oncology, are still rare in Germany. Conclusively the waiting time is sometimes more than three months. Based on financial and political reasons there won't be an increase in out-patient service in the future. Psycho-oncology e-health service can help to solve this severe healthcare problems and close the gap between psychological in- and outpatient cancer care. Oncologists can refer to the 'virtual office' where patients immediately find information and help.

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