

Journal Watch (Assessments)

Symptom Identification and Management: A Rapid Notification System

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Abstract:

Throughout the course of their illness, cancer patients receive care from almost every sector of the health-care system. At any stage they can suffer from significant disease or treatment-related symptoms. Optimal symptom management requires access to consistent assessment, management and communication between healthcare providers. This article describes a 2-phase project in southeastern Ontario that launched a system to reliably and efficiently capture self-reported information from patients about their symptoms. In Phase I a computer software program was developed and launched that made use of a patient-operated touch-screen computer kiosk located in the cancer centre to electronically capture and document symptom intensity information and notify appropriate health professionals if symptoms were not well controlled. In Phase II systems were developed and implemented that enabled patients to complete their daily general functional and symptom assessments from outside the clinic: a secure website for those with Internet access and a telephone assessment for others. Again, these systems electronically documented the assessments and notified appropriate health professionals by email if symptoms were not well controlled.

Comments:

Strengths/uniqueness:

This is an innovative initiative to increase measurement and evaluation of symptom intensity in cancer populations. It includes a method to prompt health care interventions for patients.

Weakness:

Analysis of project objectives is incomplete and it is unclear whether this project has resulted in any improvements in patient outcomes.

Relevance to Palliative Care:

This system is a potentially useful and easy approach to ensure increased standard measurement of patient symptom distress. Efficient and effective staff response to manage problems is an essential element in any similar project implementation.