

# Conference Summaries

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## Physician's Perceptions of Patient Values

**Karen Sepucha, PhD**

*Dr. Sepucha, a Senior Scientist with the Health Decision Research Unit at Massachusetts General Hospital and an Instructor in Medicine at Harvard Medical School, discussed the contrast between what physicians believe patients want regarding early-stage breast cancer treatment and what patients actually report about their preferences.*

Dr. Sepucha presented data from her work creating and testing instruments to measure decision quality. With colleagues at the Health Decision Research Unit, she recently conducted a survey evaluating the perspective of both providers and patients about the most important facts and goals for patients to know about 14 medical decisions. The three overarching findings of the study were:

1. The majority of decisions are delegated to providers.
  - Providers underestimate their influence on patients' decisions.
  - The data show that 46 to 86 percent of patients (with the exact proportion varying by condition) rank "doing what the doctor thinks is best" as a high priority, whereas only 5 to 40 percent of providers feel similarly.
2. Key differences exist between the focus of providers and that of patients both in terms of what the key information is and what patients care about most.
  - Providers tend to focus on benefits; patients focus on both benefits and harms.
    - When asked to select the top three things patients should know about chemotherapy and hormonal therapy for breast cancer, providers focused on two benefits: "chemotherapy reduces the chance of having cancer come back and increases survival" and "hormonal therapy reduces the chance of having cancer come back and increases survival." Not one provider ranked a risk or side effect in his or her top three.
    - In contrast, patient responses were more evenly scattered among those benefits and several items that focused on the serious risks and side effects associated with chemotherapy and hormonal therapy.
  - Patients focus on more basic issues, such as logistics and impact on usual activities, than providers do.
    - When asked about the top three pieces of information that are most important for a number of conditions (eg, "continuing usual activities will not make herniated disc worse"), a relatively low proportion of providers felt the issues were important.
    - In contrast, a significantly higher proportion of patients felt these issues were important.
  - When asked to identify the top goals and concerns for breast cancer treatment decisions, providers tend to cluster on a few items, whereas patient responses tend to be more diverse.
    - For example, one third of patients responded that one of their top three goals and concerns regarding reconstruction was avoiding use of a prosthesis; none of the providers queried regarded this as a top goal and concern.

## Physician's Perceptions of Patient Values Karen Sepucha, PhD (continued)

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- These data suggest that there is a disconnect between what providers think patients should know and what patients want to know. In addition, there is a disconnect between what patients truly care about and what providers feel is most important for patients.
3. The data strongly suggest that delegation of decision-making to providers is problematic.
- Patients are unlikely to receive the essential information they need to be truly informed.
  - Patients are unlikely to receive the treatment that best matches their individual values and preferences.
  - Poor decisions, either due to lack of the right information or providers' misconceptions about patients' values and preferences, can result in patient regret about the treatment choice.

Dr. Sepucha concluded by emphasizing the importance of incorporating patients' and providers' views when determining the key information and most salient goals and concerns for valid measures of decision quality. Identifying key information, goals, and concerns is critical for determining the extent to which patients are informed and whether or not treatments reflect what's most important to patients.