



the schwartz center

FOR COMPASSIONATE HEALTHCARE

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Patients, Doctors Strongly Support Compassionate Healthcare

But worry that compassionate care will suffer as system is transformed

Boston (November 16, 2010) – The vast majority of patients and doctors believe that not only does compassionate healthcare make a difference in how well patients recover from illness, it can even make a difference in whether a patient lives or dies, according to a new national poll of patients and doctors commissioned by the Schwartz Center for Compassionate Healthcare at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

Among patients, 84% agreed that compassionate healthcare makes a difference in how well patients recover from illness, while 81% of doctors also agreed with this statement. More surprisingly, 81% of patients and 71% of doctors said they believe that good communication and emotional support – the essential elements of compassionate healthcare – can actually make a difference in whether a patient lives or dies.

However, when asked whether the U.S. healthcare system provides compassionate care, only 53% of patients and 58% of doctors said that it does. Looking to the future, 67% of patients and 55% of doctors said they are concerned that the changes taking place in our healthcare system will make it more difficult for caregivers to provide compassionate care.

“We have known for a long time that when caregivers show compassion to patients, patients are more hopeful, more motivated to follow treatment plans, and less likely to file medical malpractice claims,” said Julie Rosen, executive director of the Schwartz Center, a nonprofit organization that trains caregivers to be more compassionate. “However, we also know that the patient-caregiver relationship is under increasing strain. What this survey tells us is that while we work to transform healthcare and reduce costs, we must not lose sight of the importance of empathy and compassion to quality of care and the healing process.”

The Schwartz Center survey was conducted by Marttila Strategies and Braun Research from September 23-October 29 among 800 patients who had been hospitalized for at least three days within the past 18 months and 500 physicians who spend at least some of their time taking care of hospitalized patients. Excluded from the survey were women with uncomplicated pregnancies and children 18 years of age and younger.

The poll found that patients and doctors generally agree about the importance of the basic elements of compassionate healthcare, which were identified as:

- Showing respect for patients, their families and those important to them.
- Treating patients as people, not a disease.
- Conveying information in a way that is understandable.
- Listening attentively to patients.
- Gaining the patient's trust.
- Expressing sensitivity, caring and compassion for the patient's situation.
- Spending enough time with the patient.
- Striving to understand the patient's emotional needs.
- Giving patients hope, even when the news is bad.
- Showing understanding of a patient's cultural and religious beliefs.

There was less agreement on elements such as apologizing to a patient if a doctor has made a mistake (75% of patients rated this objective a 10 on a 10-point scale, while only 54% of doctors rated it a 10), communicating test results in a timely and sensitive manner (78% of patients and 61% of doctors rated this a 10), and comfortably discussing sensitive, emotional or psychological issues (63% of patients and 50% of doctors rated this a 10).

There was also a gap between the compassionate care that patients said should be provided and the care they actually received during their most recent hospitalization. The greatest differences were in the expectation that doctors would express sensitivity, caring and compassion versus how successfully doctors demonstrated these behaviors in the hospital (83% versus 67%) and the expectation that doctors would listen attentively versus what patients experienced in the hospital (91% versus 67%).

“These results indicate that we have more work to do to ensure that the compassionate care patients hope to receive is actually reflected in their day-to-day interactions with doctors, nurses and other caregivers,” Rosen said.

Despite the fact that the majority of both patients and doctors expressed a desire for continuity of care with one doctor and care team, 62% of patients said that their primary care physician had not been in touch with them while they were in the hospital, 29% said they never met the doctor who was in charge of their hospital care before they entered the hospital, and a quarter of all patients said they were not sure who was in charge of their care while they were in the hospital.

“What we are seeing is care becoming increasingly fragmented among multiple clinicians and teams just when patients are the sickest and most vulnerable and need ongoing clinical relationships the most,” said Beth Lown, MD, medical director of the Schwartz Center. “Unless we improve how we share information, not just about clinical and medical issues, but also about the patient as a person, patients will become orphans in the hospital and in our healthcare system.”

Among doctors, 83% said they want their patients to play an active role in the medical decision-making process. Patients strongly endorsed a similar view, with 79% saying they want play an active role in determining the course of their medical care.

As for who is responsible for ensuring good communication, 78% of doctors said they bear the primary responsibility for making sure that there is good communication between them and their patients, while only 42% of patients said they felt they were primarily responsible for ensuring good communication with their doctors.

The Schwartz Center for Compassionate Healthcare (www.theschwartzcenter.org) was founded in 1995 by Ken Schwartz, a prominent Boston healthcare attorney who died of lung cancer at the age of 40. Based at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, the center is dedicated to promoting compassionate healthcare. Its signature program, the Schwartz Center Rounds, which provide an opportunity for caregivers to discuss difficult emotional issues that arise in caring for patients, are held monthly at 210 hospitals, outpatient centers and nursing homes in the U.S. and the United Kingdom and reach more than 60,000 clinicians each year.

During the past two years, Marttila Strategies – based in Boston and Washington, DC – has conducted four national public opinion polls on healthcare-related issues and healthcare reform. The firm has also conducted numerous focus groups on the topic. Braun Research is a public opinion research firm based in Princeton, NJ.