



Duration of opening statement of patients attending a chronic pain clinic consultation

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Abstract

Background The opening patient statement is an important part of the medical consultation. It is where after the initial solicitation the physician gets information about the patient's current problems and concerns. Previous research shows that 23–28% of patients are allowed to complete their opening statement un-interruptedly in the general practice setting. Interruption results in fewer patient concerns expressed and failure to gather potentially important patient information.

Objectives The objective of the study was to assess the duration of opening statements of patients attending a chronic pain clinic consultation.

Study design Prospective observational study

Setting Chronic pain clinic. University teaching hospital

Methods Following written informed consent, data was collected prospectively from 100 adult patients attending a chronic pain clinic consultation at a university hospital. We recorded the time of the opening statement following a standardized opening question by the pain physician. No verbal or non-verbal interruption by the physician was made during the patient's opening statement.

Results Out of 100 adult patients, 37% ($n = 37$) were male and 63% ($n = 63$) were female. Mean age (years) was 54.4. The mean opening statement time was 89 s.

Limitations The study is limited by being a single-centered study.

Conclusions The duration of opening statements of patients attending a chronic pain clinic consultation when systematically studied takes a very short amount of time. It is important that all interruptions should be avoided. Our findings should encourage physicians to allow patients to complete their opening statements un-interruptedly in the chronic pain clinic.

Keywords Communication · Consultation

Introduction

The medical interview is central to clinical practice [1]. It is estimated that doctors perform 200,000 consultations in a professional lifetime [1]. The patients opening statement is part of the medical consultation. It is where after the initial solicitation

the physician gets information about the patient's current problems and concerns [2].

Demands for increased time efficiency and cost controls may limit the time available for the individual components of the medical consultation. Beckman and Frankel [3] found that physicians (primary care) interrupted their patients in 69% of consultations after a mean time of 18 s. Interruption of the patient's opening statement shifts the consultation from patient-centered to physician-centered format. Patients report more satisfaction when they are listened to and when the physician used patient-centered approach to consultation [4]. Interruption also results in fewer patients concerns expressed, late arising concerns, and failure to gather potentially important patient data [4].

Chronic pain patients generally take up disproportionate amount of primary care physician time prior to pain clinic

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consultation [5]. They thus may have experienced interruption during consultations. The duration of the opening statement in these patients has not been systematically studied. The aim of this prospective study was to assess the duration of the opening statement in patients attending a chronic pain clinic consultation. Understanding this aspect of the consultation with these patients will improve the communication processes and thus patient care.

Methods

The institutional research ethics committee approved the study. Written informed consent was obtained. We audio recorded chronic pain patients opening statements on an Apple iPad 3 (developed and marketed by Apple Inc., Cupertino California, USA). One hundred adult patients attending a university teaching hospital pain clinic for the first time were studied. To be included in the study, the recording had to include the standardized question asked by the pain physician and continued until the patient finished his/her opening statement.

No verbal or non-verbal interruption by the physician was made during the patient's opening statement. The standardized question used was "tell me the story of your pain and your concerns." A single author (DH) conducted consultations to further standardize study methodology.

The duration of the patients opening statements was recorded. Gender, age, duration of chronic pain, and mode of chronic pain onset was collected. Primary outcome measure was opening statement time (seconds).

We used nonparametric Mann-Whitney *U* test to analyze differences in the opening statement time between genders. Nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis test was used to analyze opening statement duration between different pain modes of onset. Data is presented as median and standard deviation.

Results

Out of 100 adult patients, 37% ($n = 37$) were male and 63% ($n = 63$) were female. Mean age was 54.4 years (16.6).

The median opening statement was 89 s with an interquartile range of 60.2–135.8 s. The opening statement time was positively skewed due to a few outliers whose opening statement was more than 200 s. Seventy-five percent of our patients finished their opening between 60.2–135.8 s.

When the total time in seconds was plotted against age, there was no relationship seen, even when split by gender. When the opening statement time was compared between genders, the median for males was 71.3 s, and for females, it was 99.3 s ($P = 0.68$). Modes of onset of chronic pain were insidious (70%), following injury (24%), and following

surgery (6%). The relationship of the opening statement time and different modes of onset of pain was not significantly different ($P = 0.73$).

Discussion

The duration of the opening statement in patients attending a chronic pain clinic consultation was a median of 89 s. The demographic variables and mode of pain onset had no effect on the duration of the opening statement.

The results of our study are comparable with a Langewitz [6] study that showed a median spontaneous talking time of 92 s in a University Hospital Internal Medicine clinic. This study also reported that 78% of their patients finished the opening statement in 2 min [6]. In another study, from a neurological practice [7], the average opening statement time was 1 min and 40 s. Seventy percent of patients spoke for less than 2 min [7]. Our results refute the belief that chronic pain patients talk too much and interfere with a busy clinic schedule [5]. We believe that some chronic pain patients may be poor storytellers due to previous health care experiences.

Physicians interrupt the patient when listening to the opening statement [3, 4]. In these studies, 28 and 23% patients completed their opening statement, respectively. Patients were interrupted at mean of 18–23 s. These interruptions result in poor patient satisfaction [3], loss of important clinical information [3], physician centered consultation [3], and non-adherence to treatment plan [8].

The study is limited by being a single-centered study. Future studies should examine the influence of interruptions on pain clinic consultation outcomes.

Our study showed that listening to patients opening statement is not time-consuming. Understanding this aspect of the consultation with these patients will improve the communication processes and thus patient care.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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