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RECEIVING SERIOUS NEWS VIA TELEMEDICINE: EXPERIENCE OF A SMALL STANDARDIZED PATIENT COHORT

Introduction: Traditionally, serious conversations between providers and patients have been held in person. The COVID-19 crisis has prompted the rapid adoption of telemedicine for almost all health care. We undertook this study to explore the perceptions of standardized patients (SPs) on the experience of receiving serious news in the telemedicine setting.

Methods: Five SPs participated in a scenario wherein a medical student is asked to give serious news to the SP. Five students and one SP participated in a “rolling” role play and were asked to provide concerning test results to the SP while attending to the SP’s emotional state and readiness and developing a plan for next steps. All SPs received an emailed survey asking them to comment on the specific experience of receiving serious news remotely.

Results: Four (80%) SPs responded. SPs rated their ability to perform as patients highly (mean 4.75/5) and to provide feedback to student learners (mean 4/5). The perception of the SPs from the “patient” perspective is shown in the table below. SPs commented that the most difficult parts of receiving serious news in the telemedicine setting related to empathy: perhaps not recognizing subtle language or nonverbal cues, lack of touch, and the “impersonal” nature of a computer screen. All indicated that they would prefer to receive serious news in person.

Conclusions: SPs found that the cognitive aspects of medical visits could be readily accomplished via telemedicine. However, verbal and nonverbal expressions of empathy were not readily apparent in the virtual setting. Clinicians and patients should be aware of the limitations of the telemedicine setting and should consider strategies to foster strong relationships with patients in the virtual setting.

Table 1: Perception of SP, from the “Patient” Role, of the Experience of Receiving Serious News via Telemedicine

Question Mean Score (out of 5)

The ability to establish a strong rapport/connection with the caregiver/provider over video conference 3.5

Your ability to understand the news being delivered 4.25

Your ability to emotionally process the “serious news” 4

The provider’s ability to more deeply explore your emotion 3.25

The provider’s ability to recognize and respond to “dropped clues” from you as the patient 3.25

The provider’s ability to display empathy 3.5

The provider’s ability to equip you with more information about next steps 4

Your ability to understand the next steps in your care 4.5

Your sense that the news was delivered with compassion 3.75