Comparing patient and healthcare professional perceptions on multiple sclerosis management and care – a sub-analysis of disease progression perceptions.

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Background

MS in the 21st Century is an initiative led by a Steering Group comprised of international multiple sclerosis (MS) specialists and patient advocates.

The Steering Group’s current focus is to improve education and communication between healthcare professionals (HCPs) and patients with MS (PwMS). Other study groups have shown that shared-decision making and improved communication result in better clinical outcomes and improved patient satisfaction with treatment.1

In 2016, the MS in the 21st Century Steering Group developed a survey with the aim of identifying key differences in the perspectives of HCPs and PwMS with respect to various aspects of MS care.

Objective

To compare the priorities of HCPs and PwMS with respect to MS management and care.

To specifically identify disparities between HCP and PwMS perceptions of how disease progression is communicated.

Method

A 10-question electronic survey was developed by the Steering Group to evaluate HCP/PwMS opinions on various aspects of MS management.

This survey was then conducted at four international neurology congresses – ECTRIMS 2016, CISM 2017, CONy 2017, and ENSP 2017.

An equivalent patient survey was conducted at EMSP 2017, CMSC 2017, and the Merck MS Patient Ambassador Summit 2017.

The survey emphasized aspects of patient support relating to diagnosis, treatment decisions, and communicating the concept of disease progression.

Following analysis of the responses from these events, the survey was adapted to include new questions with a specific further focus on how disease progression is communicated.

The updated HCP and patient surveys were conducted at ECTRIMS 2017, MS Trust 2017, and CMSC 2018.

Results

A total of 196 HCPs and 143 PwMS completed the surveys. Respondents could select one or more answers and the questions were non-mandatory.

When asked about what form disease progression discussions take, HCPs said that they used analogies relevant to the patient (53.3%, n=104) and provided written information on the topic (33.3%, n=65) (Figure 1).

PwMS were least likely to agree with these statements with only 27.2% (n=39) saying that HCPs used analogies and 16.8% (n=19) saying they had been provided written information on the topic (Figure 1).

However, PwMS were almost twice as likely (23.3%, n=24) as HCPs (12.6%, n=13) to say that the discussion focused on scientific graphs and images (Figure 2).

A high proportion of both HCPs (50.1%, n=31) and PwMS (47.2%, n=64) said that the patient was allowed to guide the discussion (Figure 2).

A quarter of PwMS (25.5%, n=36) stated that they had not had any discussions with their HCP about disease progression (Figure 1).

When asked whether there were enough resources to explain disease progression, both HCPs (45.2%, n=67) and PwMS (42.6%, n=46) said that they would like more printed patient resources (Figure 3).

However, HCPs and PwMS disagreed on the need for online patient resources with only 27.9% (n=20) of HCPs stating they wanted more compared to 41.7% (n=11) of PwMS (Figure 2).

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A potential explanation for this disconnect may be the complexity of the subject matter. Over a third of PwMS and HCPs said that patients don’t understand the concept of disease progression. If patients are not properly educated about what disease progression is then they might not recognize when their HCP raises the subject with them.

However, it is still likely in that particular cases, HCPs avoid discussing disease progression with their patients. It is important to note that they may be due to a misunderstanding of patient need, with HCPs seemingly unable to take progression patients don’t want to think or talk about this subject, a view that only a small proportion of PwMS hold.

Increasing patient engagement and empowerment in MS could help to address this misalignment of perceptions by giving patients the confidence to raise the issues that are important to them with their HCPs.

Regardless of these different perceptions, HCPs and PwMS are both agreed that a lack of time in appointments is a major barrier to effective communication, particularly when it comes to sensitive and complicated subjects such as disease progression.

Discussion

These data show a large disconnect in HCP and patient perspectives around disease progression communication, not only on how the conversations are taking place but also if they are occurring at all.

An interesting difference in perspective was that PwMS felt less likely to say that the conversations focused on scientific graphs and images as HCPs. PwMS rated this form of information as the least useful in the follow up question and therefore this might be an example of how negativity bias can influence the perceptions of patient-HCP interactions.

The large disparity in perceptions of the occurrence of disease progression discussions is important to note with around 1 in 4 of PwMS stating that they had never discussed the topic with their HCP.

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Conclusions

There are numerous communication gaps between HCPs and PwMS around the topic of disease progression.

This data suggests three major areas where patient-HCP communication about disease progression could be improved to help bridge these communication gaps:

1) More educational resources to help introduce patients to the concept of disease progression and help them take a more active role in discussions with their HCP.

2) Greater HCP understanding of patient perspectives and priorities

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Acknowledgments

The MS in the 21st Century initiative is financially supported by Merck KGaA, Darmstadt, Germany; Secretariat support and editorial input was provided by Cello Health Communications. Medical writing assistance was provided by Cello Health Communications (Owen Hedges) and was funded by Merck KGaA, Darmstadt, Germany.

Disclosures

Patrick Vermeersch receives honoraria and consulting fees from: Biogen Idec, Sanofi Genzyme, Bayer, Novartis, Teva, Merck Serono, OSI and Agenovis, Research support from Biogen Idec, Sanofi Genzyme, Bayer and Merck Serono.

Sven Schippling receives consulting and speaker fees and travel grants from: Biogen Idec, Merck Serono, Sanofi Genzyme/Sanofi Aventis, Novartis.

Jürg Kesselring receives honoraria from Merck Serono.

Elisabetta Verdun di Cantogno is an employee of Merck KGaA.

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References