Genetic Counselor Response to Patient Concerns

Michelle Endo and Lee Ellington
College of Nursing

Although communication has become an increasingly important issue in the medical field, there has been little research conducted in genetic counseling communication. In the present study, we examined the expression of client concerns and related counselor responsiveness. The project involves two phases. Phase one involves five steps: tool refinement and training, coding and reliability, data entry, data analysis and presentation of results. Phase two involves client physiological response.

A sample of 177 simulated genetics counseling sessions were videotaped (96 prenatal and 81 cancer) as part of a larger study. A national sample of counselors was randomly assigned to conditions based on simulated client race and presence of spouse. All videotapes were first coded with Roter Interaction Analysis System (RIAS). They were then coded a second time identifying incidences of client RIAS concern statements and the counselor antecedents and responses. For each antecedent and response statement, coders assigned a categorical code based on process and content of the interaction. Sixty-nine of the prenatal sessions have been coded, merged with the larger data set and are currently being analyzed. These results are likely to have training and clinical implications for the rapidly evolving profession of genetic counseling.

The second phase involves the client physiological reactions while viewing the genetic counselor response to client concern. It’s likely that clients process genetic counseling and testing information within a context of psychological, physiological and social factors, yet little is known about this process. New investigations are underway which examine the genetic counselor and client communication so as to improve client outcomes (ACS-M1SG-04-208-01; P: L. Ellington; NIH-1R01HG002688-01A1; PI: D. Roter).

This project involves studying individual differences in communication derived from theories of emotional expression and physiological stress response. According to theories of emotional expression, talking about distressing events can help individuals integrate such events, and can lead to improved health and adjustment (Pennebaker et al., 1988; Smyth, 1998). Individuals’ expression of distress may be impacted by either supportive, receptive responses or unsupportive, critical responses from others (Espana, 2002). Finally, both the expression (Esterling et al., 1994) and the suppression of distress (Gross & Levenson, 1997) have been linked to health by specific physiological pathways. These pathways within genetic counseling interaction are currently being examined. The results are likely to have training and clinical implications for the rapidly evolving profession of genetic counseling.