The Importance of Incorporating Health Literacy in Translating Cardiogenetic Knowledge to Clinical Practice

T. Goodspeed, N. DeGroat, S.M. Dolan
Montefiore-Einstein Center for Cardiogenetics
Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology and Women’s Health, Division of Reproductive Genetics, Albert Einstein College of Medicine

**Introduction**

In the growing era of personalized genomic medicine, the ability to offer disease risk assessments and predictive testing to individuals presents ethical, legal and social concerns as well as significant communication challenges to clinicians. These challenges are amplified in the area of cardiogenetics, where molecular genetic technology exists to detect mutations responsible for cardiac channelopathies including Long QT Syndrome (LQTS) and Brugada Syndrome, which can explain a previously sudden unexplained death in an adult (SUDS) or infant (SIDS). Results from this genetic testing may have implications for surviving family members, who may benefit from lifesaving personalized medical and lifestyle recommendations. The health literacy area is vital in this respect, as the genetics field continues to grapple with the challenges of conveying information accurately to patients and ensuring comprehension.

**Background**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SIDS/Crib Death</th>
<th>SUDS: Sudden Unexplained Death Syndrome</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Timing</strong></td>
<td>1st year of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prevalence</strong></td>
<td>Ages 1-35 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Genetics</strong></td>
<td>Unknown</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Approx. 10-20% of cases associated with a cardiac ion channel mutation</strong></td>
<td>~50% identifiable genetic etiology, 75% of which is an ion channel gene mutation</td>
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*Figure: QT interval can be prolonged by mutations in K+ (potassium) or Na+ (sodium) channel.*

**Methods regarding Patient Health Literacy**

I. Genetic testing for proband and at-risk relatives in the clinic
II. New gene discovery
III. Conducting interviews on subjective patients learning about Long QT syndrome
IV. Focus Groups discussing implications of fact sheets and their strengths and weaknesses
V. Implications surrounding usage and education

**Preliminary Results: Related to Health Literacy**

Qualitative research is particularly well suited to studying the subjective experiences of clinic patients with the goal of improving health literacy, informed decision-making, and compliance with medicine and lifestyle recommendations.

**Theme: Family Interaction**

**Finding:** Differences between and within families in their attitudes toward sharing genetic information with other family members.
   a) “You can tell people...I got this (LQT) you should get tested, but it’s up to them”
   b) “Your heart takes a little bit longer to re-start than most people’s. So they want to give you this (ICD) so if something happens, you’ll be OK”

**Finding Issues:**
1. Do clinicians have a duty to warn at-risk family members if the proband refuses to disclose testing results?
2. What are the obligations of the clinician to an adolescent family member regarding informing and genetic testing?
3. Should parents be required to seek testing for an inform their minor children of results if the family history indicates increased risk? Are there special considerations for adolescents considering their age and/or psychological maturity?

**Theme: Comprehension of Health Information**

**Finding:** Difficulty understanding both the health condition (LQTS) and the meaning of genetic testing
   a) “I don’t know what LQT means-you gotta explain it to me-talk to me in plain English.”
   b) “Every time I go into the hospital, I’m so nervous- they might be telling me exactly what it is, but it’s not going in there.”

**Finding Issue:**
1. How must we, as clinicians, change the way we explain things based on education level? Language? Cultural or religious beliefs?

**Theme: Standardization**

**Finding:** Desire for standardization of emergency room, hospital, and medical examiner procedures (in families that experienced a sudden death of a family member)
   a) “I would have liked someone to walk with you; explain the tests; tell you who to call.”
   b) “You have so many people asking you the same questions over and over again. It’s understandable, but it’s a lot.”
   c) “I think all doctors should have you walk out of their offices with something in your hand – a piece of paper.”

**Finding Issues:**
1. How might the timing of desiring genetic information vary for different families who have had experiences with SIDS? Near death experience? Death of a family member?
2. What procedures should be developed to assess a family’s readiness to receive genetic information?
3. What cultural or religious beliefs might influence an individual’s desire for explanations or amount of discussion?

**Summary**

Our preliminary thematic findings have already influenced our practices in the MECC; for example, we have developed informational handouts for patients. These fact sheets are unique in that they provide basic definitions of the condition, use pictures to illustrate meaning and are written at an easy-to-understand level. These fact sheets can also be translated to usage with patients who have other cardiac channelopathy conditions and aid in communicating and defining these conditions to the public in general. The results from this interdisciplinary model provide a framework for using clinical, genetic, and health literacy information to personalize preventive health strategies and improve research, policy and programs in cardiogenetics.

The following relationships exist related to this presentation: No relationships to disclose.

The project described was supported by Award Number RC1HL100756 from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute or the National Institutes of Health.