The Advanced Practice Professionals’ Perspective: Keys to a Good Working Relationship between Advanced Practice Professions and Physicians

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OVERVIEW

A strong working relationship between advanced practice professionals (APPs) and supervising oncologists is essential for reducing medical errors, retaining employees, and improving work environments. Although there is rather limited data on the unique relationship of the APP and physician, fundamental communication skills—including open communication, mutual respect, establishing expectations, and working with mutual purpose—should be the foundation of these relationships. This paper addresses various aspects of relationship building between APPs and physicians with suggestions for establishing successful working relationships.

Development of strong, successful relationships is essential for APPs (physician assistants [PAs] and nurse practitioners) and physicians. Literature on practices employing APPs indicates that oncologists are usually very satisfied with APPs in their group, which leads to enhanced quality patient care, increased physician job satisfaction, and additional physician time for research and other academic activities.1 Although APPs’ job satisfaction is usually quite positive, their satisfaction is strongly impacted by their relationships with practice physicians. Patient interactions and autonomy and independence are also important factors.2 A study of PAs found that physicians note that entry-levels PAs are usually competent to “work effectively with physicians and other health care professionals to provide patient-centered care.”3 PAs in oncology typically report that they are skillful in “negotiating their clinical role with physicians” and that this is not particularly difficult to accomplish.4 It is likely that nurse practitioners share similar preparation and competencies in communicating with physicians regarding their roles. Primary phrases related to APP-physician relationships as reported in the literature include respect for clinical decision making, trust of the physician, physician appreciation, physician respect for the APPs’ roles and trust of their decisions, and the physician treating the APP as an equal and being supportive.2 Successful working relationships between APPs and physicians may require attention to ensure these characteristics are developed and nurtured.

Common concerns discussed informally among APPs relate to the challenges faced when their roles are not well defined within the practice setting, when supervising physicians have different practice styles, which is most challenging for APPs new to clinical practice, and when physicians provide medical care inconsistent with standard of care guidelines.

Although most all relationships require shared trust, appreciate, and respect, APPs practicing in oncology may face unique stressors that may be relieved or aggravated by their relationships with supervising physicians. APPs have reported that telling a patient about a diagnosis or recurrence, transitioning patients into palliative care, managing unrealistic expectations, and intervening with patients who...
are angry or in denial are usually difficult conversations to have, although APPs also report being skillful in doing so.4,6 These are areas that likely require professional development and mentorship as well as support from a practice oncologist. Professionals and trainees may benefit from interdisciplinary training in effective communication and it may also lead to improvement in patient care and patient safety.5,7

Physicians and APPs who seek to develop strong, supportive relationships may consider some of the following recommendations:

- Learn about and display respect for each other’s education, training, experience, and professional identities.
- Develop a team approach to patient care allowing APPs and physicians to contribute to patient care decision making.
- Establish clear roles and responsibilities for each team member (physician and APPs) and ensure other members of the practice understand these roles. Redress responsibilities as APPs develop professionally, and develop additional clinical competencies over time.
- Ensure APPs receive proper orientation and practice related training.
- Schedule regular times to discuss routine patient care (will vary depending on practice model)
- Have a clear mechanism to communicate on urgent or other time-sensitive patient issues.
- Show respect each other’s time.
- Seek opportunities for interdisciplinary educational opportunities, particularly related to patient communication.

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References