

Study shows need for improved empathic communication between hospice teams and caregivers

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(Medical Xpress)—A new study authored by University of Kentucky researcher Elaine Wittenberg-Lyles shows that more empathic communication is needed between caregivers and hospice team members.

The study, published in *Patient Education and Counseling*, was done in collaboration with Debra Parker Oliver, professor in the University of Missouri Department of Family and Community Medicine. The team enrolled hospice family [caregivers](#) and interdisciplinary team members at two hospice agencies in the Midwestern United States.

Researchers analyzed the bi-weekly web-based videoconferences between [family caregivers](#) and their hospice teams. The authors coded the data using the Empathic Communication [Coding System](#) (ECCS) and identified themes within and among the coded data. The team reviewed 82 total meetings.

Overall, the researchers noted that members of the hospice team tended to react to caregiver empathic opportunities with a perfunctory response, implicit recognition, or simple acknowledgement as defined by the ECCS scale. Most caregiver statements were met with biomedical or procedural talk from the hospice team.

Few responses went beyond to offer confirmation with a positive remark to the caregiver, and even fewer provided a shared experience to address the caregivers' emotional needs.

Prior research has shown that a physician's expression of empathy positively influences the patient-physician relationship, but as this study shows, this is often not the norm. Other research shows that physicians tend to respond more to informational cues from patients than [emotional cues](#), and often respond to patient concerns by turning the conversation to biomedical information or medical explanation, nonspecific acknowledgement or reassurance.

"This study shows the need for better empathic communication between caregivers and hospice team members," said Wittenberg-Lyles, who holds a joint appointment in the UK College of Communications and the

UK Markey Cancer Center. "Improving communication about psychosocial issues, emotional losses and frustrations for the caregiver will lead to better patient-centered care for [hospice](#) patients and their families."

Provided by University of Kentucky

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