

Patients want more information from their doctors

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in Ft Lauderdale

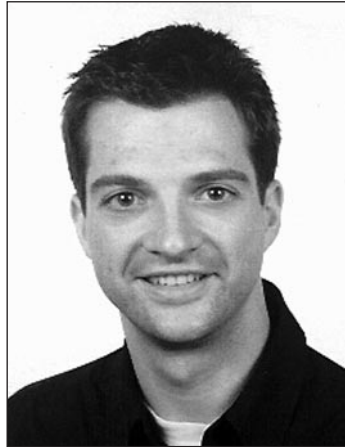
PATIENTS are hungry for more information about ophthalmic conditions and treatments, a cross-sectional survey conducted in the UK and Germany indicates.

In each country, 550 patients attending an ophthalmology outpatient clinic at a secondary or tertiary centre received an 18-question survey asking where patients went for information on eye diseases and treatments. Completion rates were high (UK 93%, Germany 81%).

The results showed some interesting differences between countries in terms of how information was obtained. However, in both regions, the patients were equally divided about whether or not they felt adequately informed about their condition. The majority, 72% in both countries, said they would like to have more information.

Their preference for informational source was from an eye care provider, either the ophthalmologist or optician, and they had a strong interest in receiving printed material versus verbal counselling, reported Markus H. Groppe MD PhD, at the annual meeting of the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology.

Active participation of patients in the management of their conditions can have an important effect on



Markus H. Groppe

their outcome. Adequate education is a factor in achieving that goal and also influences overall patient satisfaction with their care. However, there is little known about how well patients feel informed and what sources they use or would like to have to get information, said Dr Groppe, Dept of Ophthalmology, Worthing and Southland Hospital, Worthing, UK.

"The results of this study suggest there are some intercultural differences in patient perceptions and preferences, but overall they point to a need for eye care providers to provide patients with more information. While time restraints of a busy clinic are always a concern, the results of this survey suggest efforts to better inform patients need not create a significant burden since patients

prefer written over oral material."

He suggested patients might be best served by receiving a very brief overview and written material that would reinforce and expand the oral messages. Then, at the next visit, patients could be asked if they needed additional explanation about any particular points.

Demographic data gathered in the questionnaires showed the patients had a mean age of about 60 years with a range from 18 to 95.

Many patients feel they are left in the dark

Patients were asked to rate how well informed they felt about their condition using a scale of 1 (very well) to 5 (not at all). The mean scores were similar in both countries (UK 2.33, Germany 2.54) and showed that patients on average felt they were moderately-to-well informed. Sixty percent of patients in both countries felt they were very well or well informed about their condition.

"The other side of that coin is that about 40% of the patients feel they are no better than moderately informed with about 15% to 18% considering themselves just a little or not at all informed," Dr Groppe stressed.

Patients who had their conditions for a longer time, more than three years, felt better informed than those who had only been diagnosed within the past few months.

Among patients who had received information from health professionals about their conditions, the ophthalmologist was the major source in both Germany (about 90%) and the UK (about 70%). The optician was also an important information source in the UK (almost 60%), but seemed to provide little input to Germans.

Information from ophthalmologists most highly valued

When asked to rate the quality of information provided by various sources, information obtained from the ophthalmologist was regarded much more highly than information provided by family doctors, general practitioners, and opticians.

Among patients in the UK who wanted more information, about 70% wanted their ophthalmologist to be the source and 22% were interested in receiving information from their opticians. In Germany, there was an even stronger preference for being informed by the ophthalmologist (91%), while most of the remaining patients were interested in receiving information from their opticians.

Internet as information source a cause for concern

The survey also probed sources of information, including Internet use. In Germany, the newspaper, television, and friends were each reported to be a source by almost

15% of patients. Among the UK participants there was similar reliance on newspapers and friends, but television had less impact.

Responses to questions regarding Internet use showed that 40% of patients in both countries have home access to the Internet and that about one-fourth of those individuals (12% of the total population in Germany and 10% of the UK study population) were using the Internet to investigate their conditions.

However, the time spent searching was no more than three hours by the vast majority of Internet users. Only 17% of the German participants and 21% of those from the UK sample indicated that they had been advised by their eye care provider on searching the Internet to obtain information.

"While only 10% of our population was using the Internet, that rate was even higher than we might have expected considering the generally older age of our patients. The fact that the vast majority of patients are turning to the Internet for health information without any advice about reliable sources is of some concern," Dr Groppe said.

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