

The Power of Communication in Cancer Care

This article draws on research to show how clear and compassionate communication shapes cancer care, supports patients, and helps improve both their experience and outcomes.

Cancer care rarely begins in a hospital corridor. More often, it starts quietly, in the private spaces of a person's life. A symptom lingers longer than expected. A scan that was meant to reassure can instead bring unexpected uncertainty, leaving patients wondering what the future holds. A phone call requesting an earlier appointment interrupt daily routine. Even before the word "cancer" is spoken aloud, fear, anxiety, and anticipation begin shaping experience. On the surface, life continues as usual. People maintain work, family conversations, and daily routines, even as uncertainty quietly takes hold beneath the surface.

When the diagnosis is finally communicated, it lands heavily. Doctors explain results carefully. Medical terminology is precise. Treatment plans are outlined, options discussed, and future pathways explained. The science is complex, rigorous, and advancing rapidly. Oncology is one of the most studied areas of medicine. Yet treatment plans alone do not determine how patients experience care. What truly shapes understanding, confidence, and resilience is the conversation itself. The words, the pauses, the opportunity to ask questions, and the reassurance that accompanies knowledge all shape experience.

People remember more than technical information. They remember whether they were heard, whether their concerns were understood, and whether their priorities were considered. Comprehension grows gradually. Communication is not a single event but a process built over repeated interactions that establish clarity, trust, and confidence.

Understanding Diagnosis: When Words Meet Emotion

The initial diagnostic consultation carries immense emotional weight. People often receive pathology results, staging details, treatment options, timelines, and potential side effects in a single session. Even when explanations are delivered clearly and compassionately, people rarely absorb everything. Psychological research shows that stress and anxiety narrow attention and alter memory, prioritizing emotional cues over technical details.

Debra Roter and Judith Hall's studies in physician-patient communication demonstrate that patients and doctors often leave consultations with different perceptions of what was discussed. This is not a reflection of care. It reflects how the human brain processes life-altering news. *Sally Thorne's* research highlights how deeply conversations stay with patients. Even after leaving the clinic, they often replay discussions in their minds, remembering not just the facts but the feelings, the tone, and the care in the words. It is the emotional landscape of these conversations that shapes how they understand and process their journey.

Structured communication frameworks, such as the *SPIKES* protocol developed by *Baile and colleagues*, address these challenges. SPIKES encourages doctors to assess what patients already know, invite dialogue, deliver information in small, manageable portions, respond empathetically to emotions, and summarize key points. Research consistently shows that

structured approaches improve patient clarity, emotional adjustment, and satisfaction. Communication is not about saying more but about pacing, repetition, and reinforcement.

Rodin and colleagues emphasize that reinforcing information through written summaries, follow-up conversations, or asking patients to repeat what they understood significantly enhances comprehension. Even small efforts, such as pausing to check understanding or allowing patients to articulate concerns, can transform confidence and preparedness. Understanding unfolds over time, and no single consultation can carry the full weight of a diagnosis.

Bridging Clinical Accuracy and Lived Experience

Medical accuracy is essential. Decisions about surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, targeted therapy, and supportive care must be precise. Yet accuracy alone does not guarantee that patients can act on information or integrate it into their daily lives. In 2024, researchers in *BMC Nursing* studied the experiences of Iranian cancer patients in outpatient clinics, capturing how they navigated daily challenges alongside their treatment. While doctors provide detailed explanations about treatment cycles, monitoring schedules, and side effects, patients often find themselves unprepared for how these treatments will affect their daily lives. Fatigue, appetite changes, neuropathy, and cognitive changes affected daily life in ways that clinical explanations alone could not convey.

Patients reported feeling more confident when doctors connected medical information to everyday life. Explaining how energy fluctuations might affect work schedules, how nausea could influence family meals, or how treatment timing intersects with daily routines transforms abstract information into actionable guidance. Linking medical guidance to the realities of everyday life helps patients feel grounded, informed, and able to manage what lies ahead.

Minimizing medical jargon, tailoring explanations to individual health literacy levels, and providing written summaries or visual aids ensures that patients understand information practically, not just clinically. Understanding grows over repeated interactions, reflection, and structured reinforcement.

The Role of Emotion in Conversations

Cancer disrupts both the body and the mind. Health systems prioritize efficiency, safety, and precision, which can compress space for emotional processing. Yet research shows that even brief acknowledgment of fear, anxiety, or uncertainty improves comprehension, decision-making, and engagement.

Intentional presence does not require lengthy counselling. Pausing, asking how a patient is coping, allowing silence, or inviting questions provides validation. Emotional acknowledgment strengthens resilience, supports informed decision-making, and helps patients feel grounded.

Azarabadi and colleagues found that consultations often focus on reviewing symptoms and treatment logistics, while emotional concerns may receive limited attention. Even a short, focused acknowledgment of anxiety or worry prevents confusion from escalating, enhances

trust, and allows patients to engage more fully in care. Emotional connection and clinical guidance reinforce one another.

Shared Decision-Making and Personal Priorities

Modern oncology offers multiple treatment pathways, each with implications for quality of life. Surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, targeted therapies, immunotherapy, and clinical trials are options. Understanding patients' values, priorities, and preferences is critical.

Research by *Epstein and Street* shows that patients who feel heard and included in decisions experience less anxiety and greater confidence. Discussions that explore the impact of treatment on family, work, finances, and daily routines support practical, grounded decision-making. Some patients prefer active involvement, while others prefer guided recommendations. Clarifying these preferences ensures care aligns with both medical evidence and personal priorities.

Including caregivers in discussions strengthens adherence, understanding, and support. Caregivers often coordinate appointments, monitor medications, and observe side effects. Engaging them in consultations equips them to act confidently and reinforce care at home.

Continuity Across Multidisciplinary Teams

Cancer care brings together many specialists, including surgeons, medical oncologists, radiation oncologists, nurses, pharmacists, and supportive care professionals. Patients sometimes notice when team members share information differently, which can create confusion, even though having a team of experts is a strength. Clear, consistent communication across the care team helps build trust and understanding. Simple practices, such as checking in before appointments, using electronic symptom tracking, and coordinating handoffs between team members, make consultations more focused and meaningful for patients. Communication is not just about individual visits. It flows across teams, transitions, and follow-ups, shaping how patients experience and feel supported throughout their care.

Equity, Language, and Health Literacy

Effective communication must adapt to linguistic, cultural, and educational diversity. *Siminoff and colleagues* demonstrate that plain language, teach-back methods, and culturally sensitive explanations improve understanding across populations.

Professional interpreters preserve nuance, health literacy strategies clarify information, and explicit invitations to ask questions foster engagement. Socioeconomic constraints, transportation challenges, and caregiving responsibilities shape the ability to adhere to treatment. Acknowledging these realities and offering practical strategies strengthens equity and supports adherence.

Listening, Remembering, and Feeling

The VOICE trial demonstrated that communication training encourages patients to raise questions and articulate personal goals during consultations, resulting in improved engagement without extending appointment times. The Serious Illness Care Program shows

that structured discussions about goals and values improve emotional outcomes and preparedness for future decisions.

Azarabadi and Rodin show that patients understand information better when doctors connect clinical details to their daily routines and lived experiences. Small interventions such as summaries, teach-back methods, and plain-language explanations significantly enhance comprehension. These findings show that research has the greatest impact when clinicians use it to guide real, meaningful conversations with patients every day.

Communication: The Foundation of Cancer Care

Communication is not an optional skill; it is clinical infrastructure. Clear dialogue underpins patient safety, adherence, and coordination. Structured follow-ups, electronic symptom reporting, written summaries, and aligned team messaging ensure that patients feel supported and informed. Health systems that embed communication into workflows improve outcomes, reduce preventable complications, and strengthen resilience.

Policy implications are clear. Communication training should be embedded in medical education and continuing professional development. Structured conversations should be recognized within institutional frameworks. Shared decision-making tools should be standardized in clinical guidelines. Understanding and preparedness should be measured alongside clinical metrics such as survival and complication rates.

Life Beyond Cancer: The Power of Conversation at Sanjeevani

At Sanjeevani...Life Beyond Cancer, we see how a single conversation can change a person's outlook. When patients and families feel heard, guided, and supported, hope grows, and the journey through cancer becomes more manageable. This focus on compassionate, patient-centered communication drives every initiative, event, and program at Sanjeevani.

SCICC 2026, the inaugural State Conference on Integrative Cancer Care held in Jaipur, marked a milestone for the organization. While Sanjeevani has long organized national conferences, this was the first state-level event, emphasizing region-focused, integrative care. Over two immersive days, participants explored sessions addressing the whole person, not just cancer. Topics ranged from wellness and physical health, including nutrition, strength training, and stress management, to mental and emotional well-being, featuring motivation, sound healing, positive communication, and experience sharing. Therapeutic activities such as book readings and the soul-stirring Sur Sanjeevani highlighted the healing power of creativity and presence.

The conference's core impact came from two panels where medical professionals and experts shared insights on combining treatment with supportive care. They emphasized that positive, empathetic communication can transform patient experience. When patients feel heard and supported, it eases anxiety and helps them cope with treatment. These discussions showed that care, guidance, and understanding shape healing just as much as medical procedures.

Beyond SCICC 2026, Sanjeevani's reach continues to grow. More than 3.5 lakh patients joined online for the National Conference on Integrative Cancer Care, demonstrating the organization's ability to educate, guide, and connect at scale. Its YouTube channel, founded by

Ruby Ahluwalia, offers 336 videos providing practical advice and emotional support to over 68,600 subscribers. Ruby's journey as a triple-negative stage three breast cancer patient while serving as a senior officer in the Indian Railway Accounts Service inspires every initiative with insight, empathy, and determination.

SCICC 2026, national outreach, and digital engagement show that communication in cancer care is more than sharing information. It is about creating spaces where people feel seen, supported, and empowered. Through dialogue, storytelling, education, and presence, Sanjeevani helps people navigate the complexities of cancer with confidence, resilience, and hope.

By prioritizing human connection alongside medical guidance, Sanjeevani demonstrates that understanding is care and that compassionate conversation can truly transform the journey of those facing cancer.

Conclusion: Understanding is Care

Cancer care is not only about medical intervention; it begins and continues in conversation. Patients construct understanding gradually, through dialogues that explain test results, outline options, prepare families, and revisit plans. Clear communication does not eliminate uncertainty but prevents unnecessary confusion, enabling patients and caregivers to proceed with a steadier footing.

When patients leave a consultation knowing that their questions have been answered, that their concerns were heard, and that their experiences have been acknowledged, they carry a quiet confidence. This confidence does not eliminate the challenges of treatment or side effects, but it equips them to face each step with steadiness and understanding, helping them navigate the practical, emotional, and physical realities of cancer care. Evidence demonstrates that the quality of dialogue directly shapes the quality of experience. In a field marked by rapid scientific progress, communication remains foundational. It bridges medical knowledge and human experience. When structured, reinforced, and grounded in daily life, communication strengthens every dimension of care.

Treatment addresses the disease, but clear communication ensures patients understand the path ahead, are prepared for challenges, and can engage actively in decisions. Understanding itself becomes care. When communication is intentional, evidence-based, and compassionate, it transforms the experience of cancer for patients, families, and healthcare systems alike.

By prioritizing clarity, oncology care honors the humanity of each patient. When patients receive information, support, and attentive listening, they navigate treatment confidently, experience less distress, and live more fully alongside their diagnosis. Effective communication is the invisible thread that brings together medical knowledge, practical guidance, and emotional support. It is the foundation upon which high-quality cancer care is built.

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