

Preface

Recently, there has been a dramatic increase in the level of interest and involvement, by private and public institutions, in programs and projects associated with patient-centered care. In light of this significant change in the landscape, we have been motivated to write, *Interpreting Health Benefits and Risks: A Practical Guide to Facilitate Doctor-Patient Communication*. We believe this book to be timely and of value to those supportive of shared decision making (SDM).

There is considerably more awareness today of the need for doctor/patient collaboration than there was just a few years ago. This is due, in part, to the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). ACA has a number of provisions which are designed to address concerns caregivers and patients face when making critical health care choices without key information that would help them make better decisions.

The ACA established the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI)—a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization tasked with researching the effectiveness of medical treatments, along with associated risks and benefits. PCORI intends to “help people make informed health care decisions, and improve health care delivery and outcomes, by producing and promoting high integrity, evidence-based information that comes from research guided by patients, caregivers and the broader health care community.”

Other well-known public and private organizations have also become involved with initiatives that encourage physicians, patients, and other health care stakeholders to think and talk about medical tests and procedures that may be unnecessary, and in some instances cause harm. For example, *Consumer Reports* is developing and disseminating materials for patients through large consumer groups. Apparently, more than 50 specialty societies have now joined the campaign and over 30 societies will announce new lists in 2014.

The primary purpose of this book will be to make physicians and others in the public health community aware of a unique decision aid designed to improve SDM and empower patients to communicate with their doctors regarding which tests and other medical procedures are right for them. We call this tool a Benefit/Risk

Characterization Theater (BRCT), first introduced in the book, *The Illusion of Certainty; Health Benefits and Risks* (published by Springer in 2007).

The BRCT is a simple, straightforward graphic which presents a clear and objective picture of health benefits and risks associated with specific screening tests, drugs, surgeries, and other types of medical intervention. Subsequent to the release of *The Illusion of Certainty*, we have had many opportunities to utilize BRCTs when communicating with patients regarding forms of medical intervention. Based on our experience using this approach, we are confident that it will help physicians and patients make appropriate decisions together. In fact, a key motivating factor for writing this book is that we now have evidence that our approach works.

A goal of this book is to add a unique dimension to and supplement existing programs and projects which focus on communicating results from comparative effectiveness research, evidence-based medicine, and other efforts to increase meaningful patient-centered care.

Interpreting Health Benefits and Risks: A Practical Guide to Facilitate Doctor Patient Communication is an interdisciplinary book which we believe will be of interest to physicians, patients, nurses, public health organizations, colleges, universities, pharmaceutical companies, professional schools, policy-makers, insurance companies, and the general public.

The core of this book is the utilization of case studies to delineate health benefits and risks associated with medical intervention. We believe that the BRCT is generically applicable and its use could serve to further efforts toward the development of a universal decision aid. Since more emphasis is being placed on confronting escalating medical costs, acknowledged over-treatment and its iatrogenic consequences, the focus of this book is timely.

Effective use of decision aids requires an acknowledgment by physicians that the benefits from screening tests and other medical intervention remain controversial. Open and objective statements about such uncertainty are essential if we are to find a 'path forward'. Further, it is hoped that a clear and objective decision aid will encourage patients to fully participate in decision making and physicians to willingly discuss risks and benefits of tests and other procedures.

Since stories are essential to human experience, we shall be telling them in this book. The use of statistics will be minimal. Emphasis will be placed on graphics, since we believe a picture is worth more than 10,000 words—in our view, the graphic should do the math for patients. We stress the need to ask the 'right' questions. It has been our experience that if patients ask the 'right' questions, physicians will respond openly and honestly.

Notice: This book is not intended as a medical guide to self-treatment. The information of a medical nature in this book is meant to help you make informed decisions about your health by providing a more careful and complete understanding of

benefits, risks, and uncertainty. If you suspect you need medical treatment, you should discuss it with your primary care physician. If you are being treated for a medical condition or are on medication, do not change your treatment program without discussing it with your doctor.

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