

Improving communication between clinicians and patients with cancer

Anthony Back MD

University of Washington

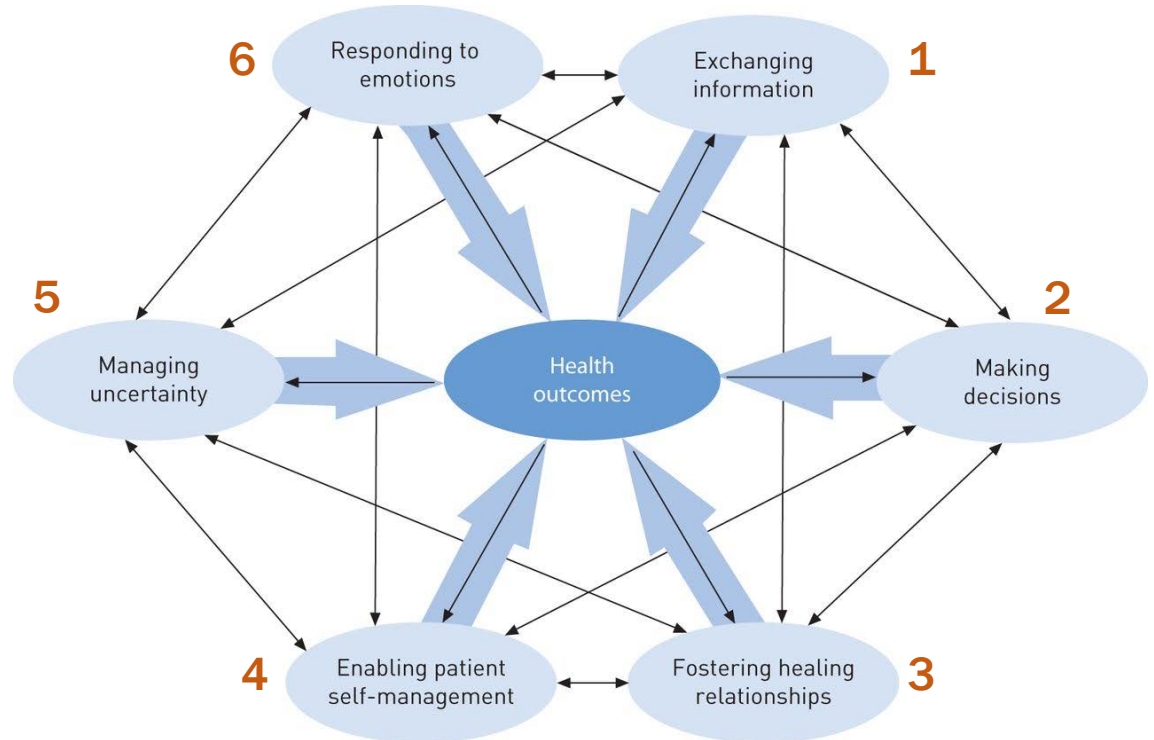
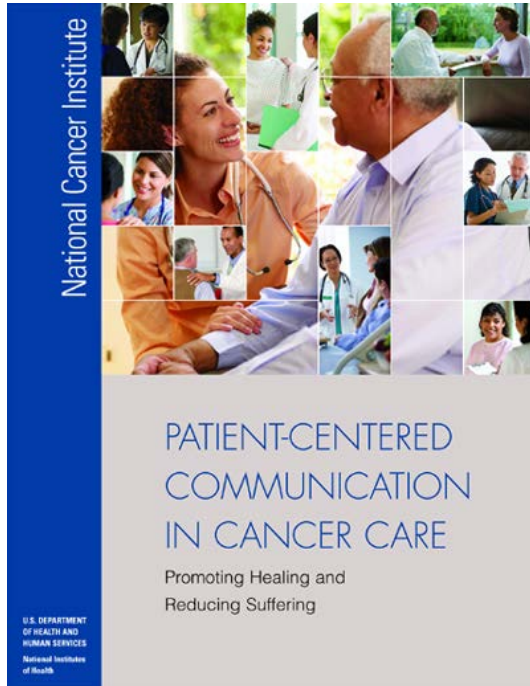
Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center

VitalTalk

Why focus on communication now?

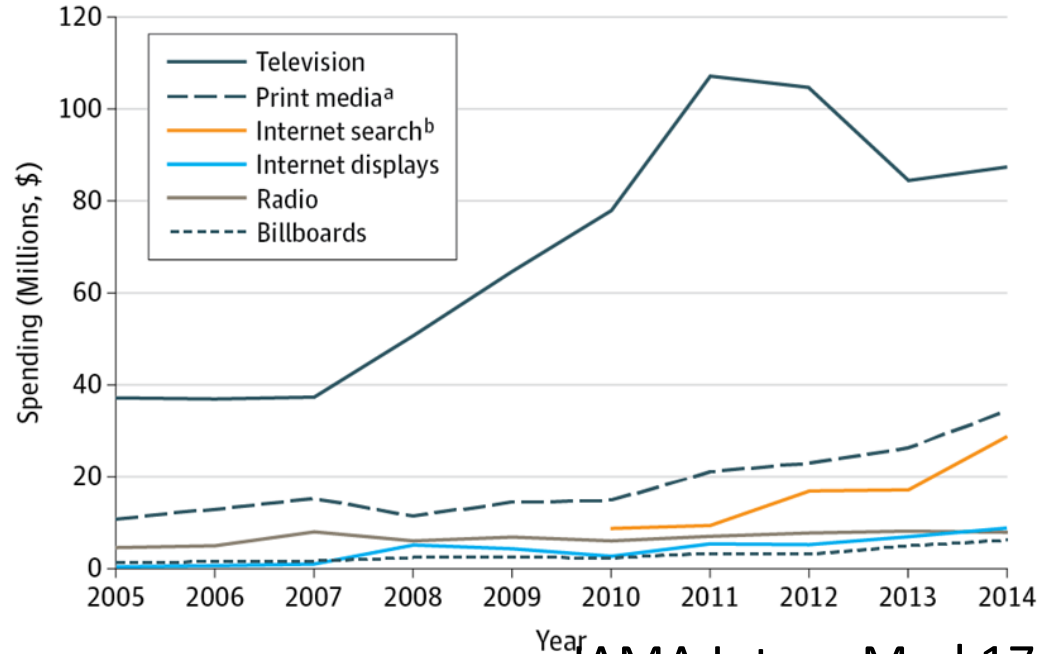
Competing demands for clinician attention: new drugs, more administrative hassles, higher expectations, internet effects

What does communication involve?



National Cancer Institute monograph 2015

A gap between the advertising and real conversations.



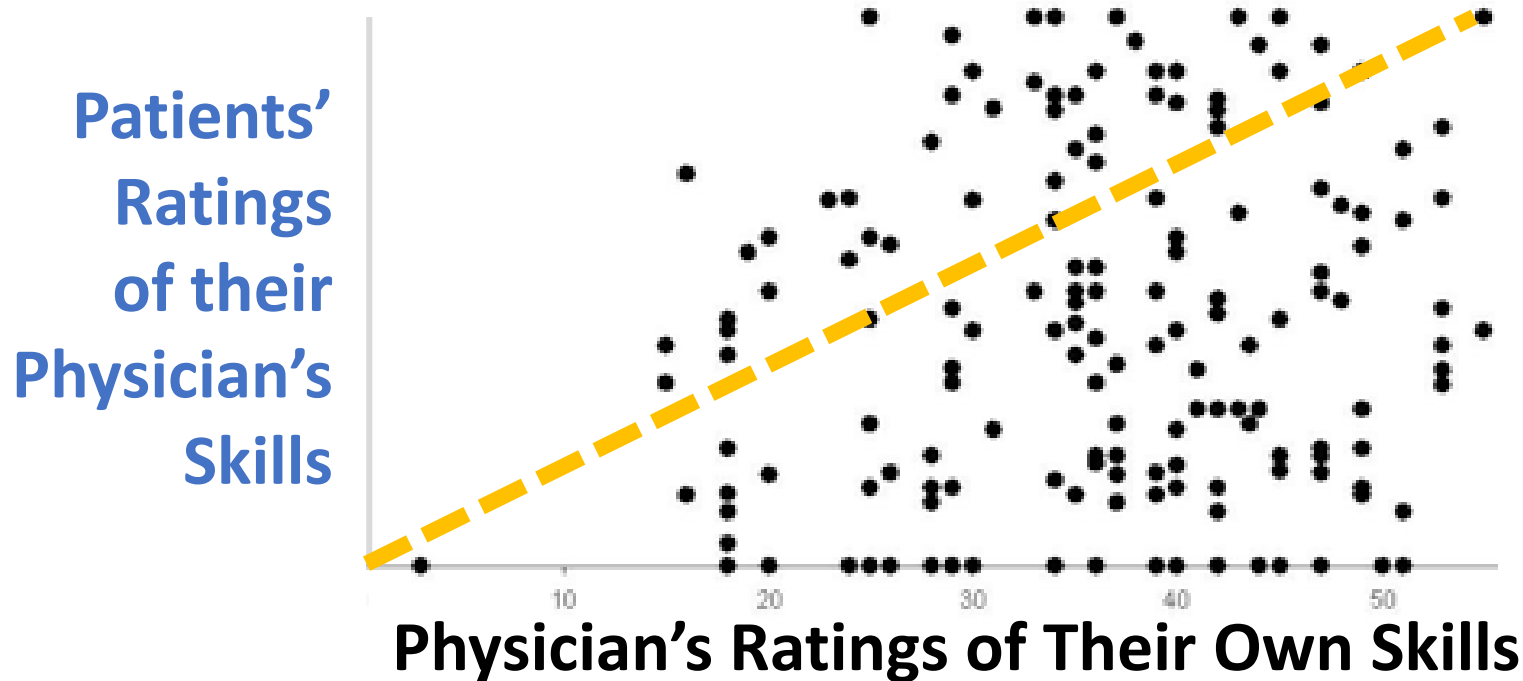
JAMA Intern Med 176:1214; 2016

What words do physicians actually use?

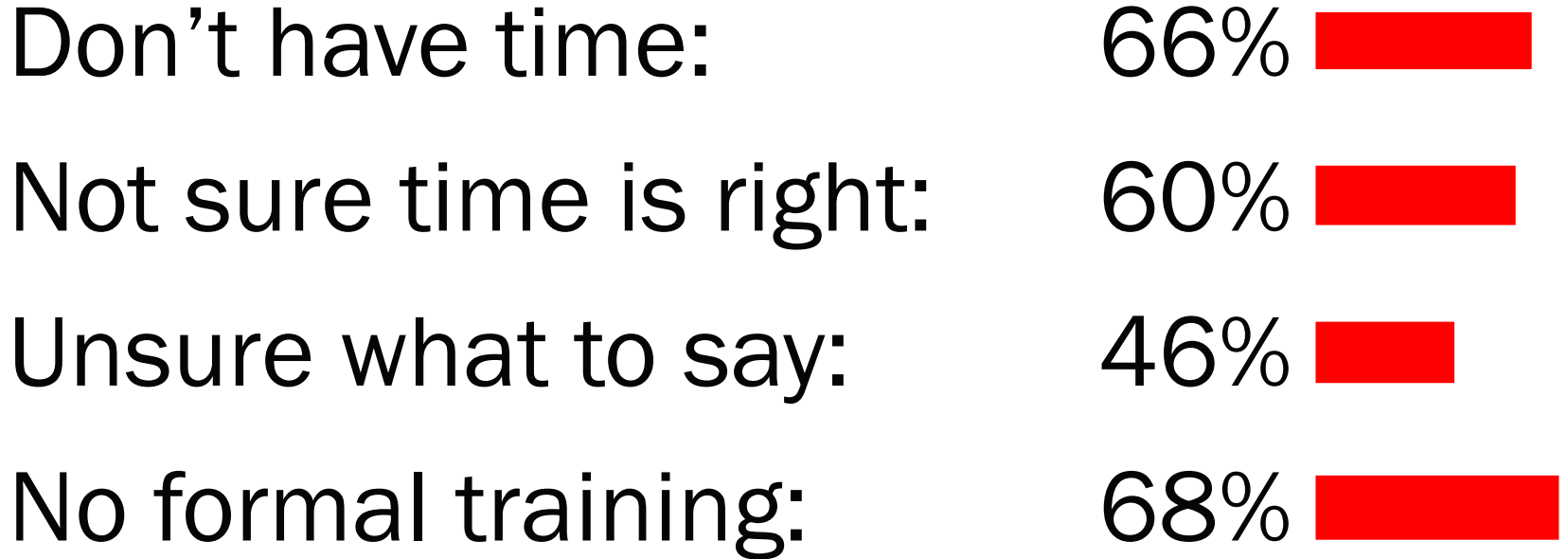
“Do you want us to do CPR, I mean pump on your chest like you might have seen on TV, if your heart stops?”



Physicians are poor judges of their own communication skills



Why don't physicians try?





How often do oncologists use 'best practice' skills?

In one study, oncologists made empathic statements in **11%** of their conversations.

Skills training changes behavior

After training, physicians:

- Use more **empathy**
- Ask more **questions** to understand
- Explore more **values**

p<.003

JAMA Internal Medicine 167:453, 2007

Serious illness conversations improve outcomes

Higher likelihood of goal-concordant care

Higher patient-rated care experience

Lower likelihood of aggressive care

Increased length of hospice

Less depression & anxiety in bereavement

[Detailed bibliography](#)

Greater physician skills, more patient trust

Randomized trial of oncologists

Trained oncologists used more
empathy $p=.024$

Patients of trained oncologists had
higher trust $p=.036$

**Communication is a
learned skill.**

vitaltalk.org non-profit, >500 faculty, 660 workshops/3 y

[Faculty Login](#)[CLINICIANS](#)[FACULTY](#)[INSTITUTIONS](#)[RESOURCES](#)[COURSES](#)[BLOG](#)[ABOUT US](#)

VitalTalk makes communication
skills for serious illness *learnable*.

Our evidence-based trainings empower clinicians and institutions.



Grow as a
CLINICIAN

We equip clinicians with expert
strategies.

Join our
FACULTY

We develop clinicians into advanced
educators.

Strengthen your
INSTITUTION

We build your capacity to provide
patient-centered care.



Strategy 1:

Better cognitive tools

Instead of one-way, biomedically
driven jargon,

Protocols that invite two-way,
person-centered exchange

Back, et al; Mastering Communication, Cambridge University Press 2009

REMAP



For LATE goals of care:

1. **REFRAME** the situation.
2. **EXPECT EMOTION** NURSE.
3. **MAP** out important values.
4. **ALIGN** with the patient & family.
5. **PLAN** treatments to uphold values.

Strategy 2:

Address both clinicians & patients

Enlist clinicians by naming their pain points

Ground protocols in empirical psychological & learning research.

JAMA Internal Medicine 167:453, 2007



Strategy 3:

Design learning situations for positive affect

Rather than shame & blame

Use deliberate practice to create experiences of success

JAMA Internal Medicine 167:453, 2007

CASE STUDY

Kaiser Permanente Northern California

Overview

VitalTalk worked with key KPNC stakeholders to create an implementation and dissemination plan for an ambitious system-wide training program.

Implementation

VitalTalk drew on its large faculty cohort to rapidly design and teach several large-scale Mastering Tough Conversation (MTC) courses with target subspecialties. Simultaneously, VitalTalk prepared faculty champions within the system to teach MTC courses.



Operationalizing Learnings

To sustain this work over time, VitalTalk designed two tools:

Cognitive talking map that worked alongside existing communication training efforts

Workflow redesign by integrating tracking efforts in the existing electronic medical record system

Results

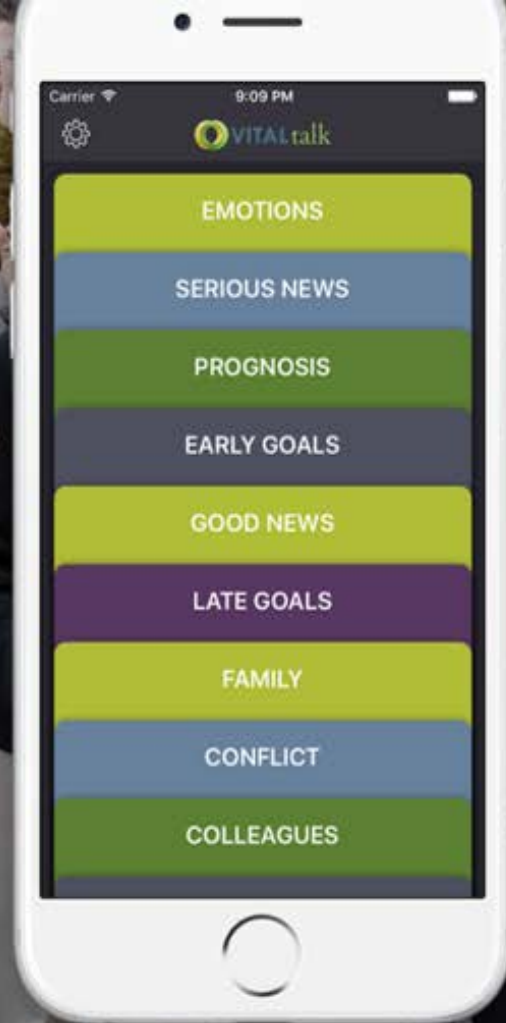
Serious illness courses are currently taught across the KPNC health system using VitalTalk curriculum, resources, and tools.

Strategy 4:

**Leverage group & peer learning
community effects**

Instead of individual pass/fail

Generate a network of informal
mentors & advisors



VITALtalk

Build your communication superpowers

The VitalTalk Tips app enables physicians, nurses, and other clinicians to improve their communication skills for patients who have a serious illness. For clinicians in hospital medicine, oncology, cardiology, nephrology, hepatology, neurology, trauma, emergency medicine, primary care, pediatrics, and palliative care.



Download on the
App Store



GET IT ON
Google play

tips.vitaltalk.org

Policy proposal 1:
**Evidence-based training should be
widely disseminated.**

Policy proposal 2:
**Health systems should embed
communication educator-
clinicians.**

Policy proposal 3:
**Payers should create incentives
that reward clinicians and
systems for participating.**

Policy proposal 4:
**Public reporting of system and
clinician measures should drive
accountability.**