

Strategies for involving family members in treatment decision making processes for older patients with cancer

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Background

In surgical oncology practice, deciding on the most optimal treatment plan for older patients can be very complex. In such complex care situations, a process of shared decision making (SDM) is preferred to align treatment decisions with what really matters in the 'every day' life of the patient. Achieving SDM for older patients may be challenging to accomplish in clinical practice. Many older patients with cancer have their family members, often their adult children, involved in a process of treatment decision making [1]. Despite the growing awareness that family members can facilitate a process of shared decision making (SDM), literature about SDM pays little attention to family relations and strategies to facilitate family involvement in decision making processes [2].

This study aimed to :

1. Explore surgeons' and nurses' perceptions about involvement of adult children in treatment decision-making for older patients with cancer; and
2. Identify strategies surgeons and nurses use to ensure positive family involvement in treatment decision making for older patients with cancer.

Methods

Qualitative open in-depth interviews were conducted with 13 surgeons and 13 nurses working in an university or general hospital in the Netherlands, in the period 2020-2021. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Qualitative content analysis was conducted according to the steps of thematic analysis. ATLAS.ti software was used to facilitate the process of coding and categorizing.

	Surgeons (n = 13)	Nurses (n = 13)
Gender		
Male	10	0
Female	3	13
Years of experience		
Mean (SD)	11.5 (7.0)	13.5 (9.9)
Oncology specialisation		
Breast & melanoma	1	3
Gastrointestinal & colorectal	10	6
Ear, nose and throat	2	4

Table 1: Participants' characteristics

Results

Three overarching themes were derived from the data: (1) frailty, (2) decision making process and (3) health professional's strategies.

1. Frailty

Both surgeons and nurses perceived that the role of adult children in decision-making about treatment increases when patients and their partners become frail and when, for example, their cognitive abilities decline.

2. Decision making process

The data revealed characteristics of adult children's involvement in three steps of the decision-making process.

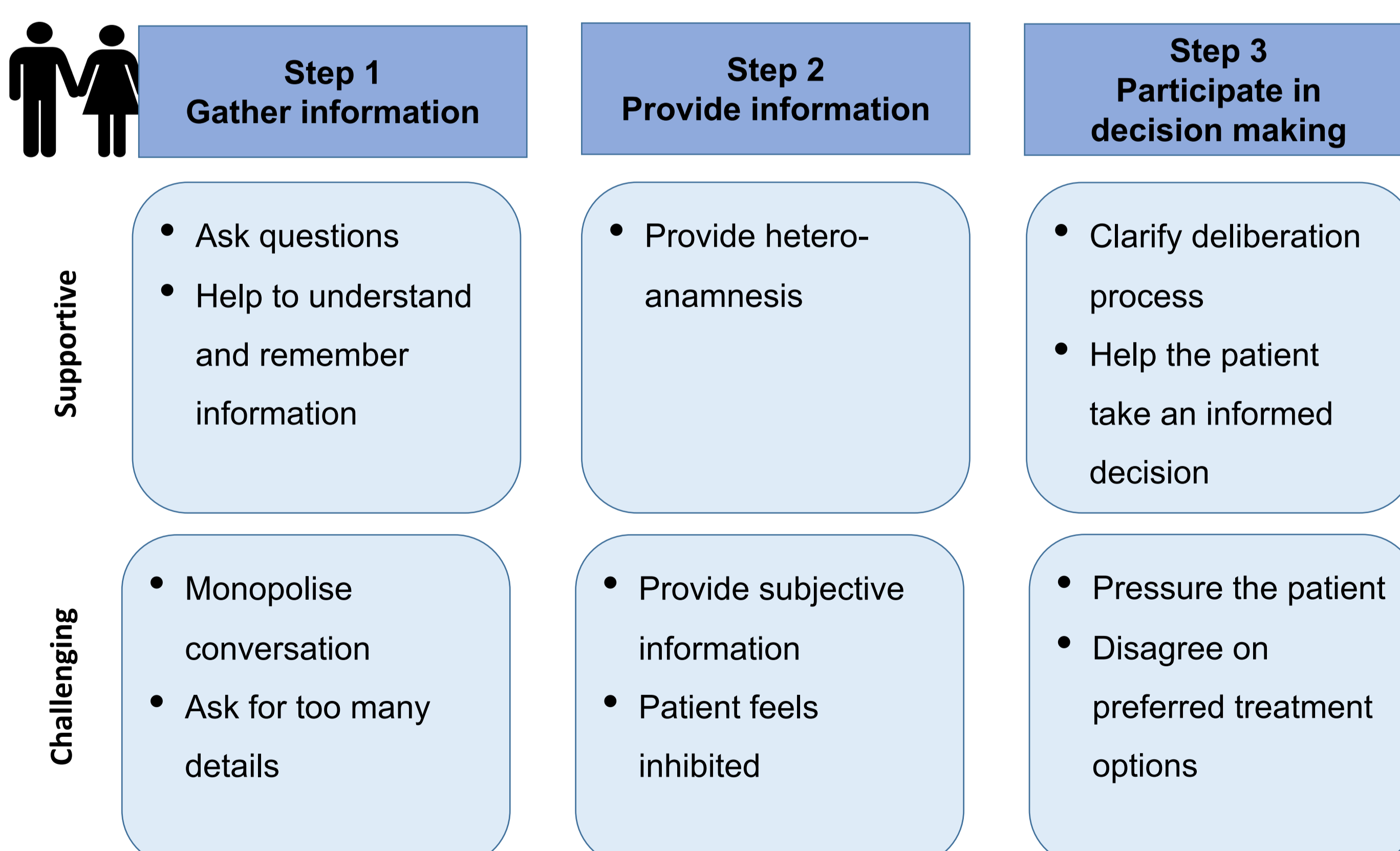


Figure 1: Characteristics of adult children's involvement in treatment decision making processes for older patients with cancer

3. Health professional's strategies

The data revealed six strategies that both surgeons and nurses use to stimulate the positive involvement of adult children in the decision-making process of treating older patients with cancer.

1. Focus on the patient

"It is key to ask the patients directly what he/she wants, especially in situations when adult children dominate the conversation".

2. Actively involve adult children

"This includes welcoming the family members, inviting them to ask questions and asking their opinion about patient's health condition and situational circumstances."

3. Acknowledge different perspectives

"Acknowledge the different opinions and emotions that patients, their partners, their adult children and others might have, so they feel understood."

4. Get to know the family system

"Ask questions about the patient's family and support network and identify stressful relations."

5. Check that the patient and family members understand the information

"When patient and family members have the same understanding about the risks and impact of the treatment on patient's daily life, this might dissolve disagreements."

6. Stimulate communication and deliberation with adult children

"Address sensitive topics, such as grief, death loss of independence and caregiver burden. This will help further deliberation at home."

"Advise patients and family members to talk about what is important for the patient in daily life."

Figure 2: Strategies surgeons and nurses use to stimulate positive involvement of adult children in decision making processes, illustrated with quotes.

Conclusions & implications for practice

Surgeons and nurses perceive involvement of adult in treatment decision making as beneficial. Practical patient and family-centered strategies are helpful in SDM for older patients with cancer.

Family involvement can trigger specific complexities and challenges in treatment decision conversations that call for practical patient and family-centered strategies.

References

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