Introduction to communication skills for radiation therapy students

Reflecting on the role communication in radiation therapy

Communication skills are important for all professionals. For health professionals, communication skills are critical as they form part of the therapeutic care for the patient. Healthcare professionals need to establish rapport with patients and demonstrate empathy throughout the therapeutic relationship. The time constraints of the clinical environment present a challenge for healthcare professionals as they gather information, give information and provide treatment for their patients while maintaining a patient-centred focus.

The resources in this LibGuide are intended for Master of Radiation Therapy students however many of the communication strategies may be adapted to other health professionals.

Communication during radiation therapy placements

In a setting of oncology care, radiation therapists (RTs) play a crucial role in providing empathetic patient care as they see patients on a regular basis during radiation treatment (Halkett et al. 2010). This means that in addition to attending to the technical demands of the role, radiation therapy students on clinical placements must navigate a complex range of communication challenges.

During clinical placements the RT student is expected to fulfill a range of communication tasks including explaining procedures to patients, answering the patient’s questions, attending to the patient’s comfort and responding to the patient’s emotional reactions. The RT student who is in regular contact with patients has a unique vantage point from which to view the patient’s experience of treatment and to liaise with the team of therapists that include other RTs, the oncologist, the oncology nurses and other relevant health professionals who collaboratively care for the patient.

During the patient’s treatment period the RT is charged with the responsibility for monitoring the patient for side effects of treatment and screening for signs of possible depression or anxiety during the stressful treatment period. Communication skills for RTs are therefore a very important dimension of RT practice and the RT student placement.

So how can students improve their skills during their placements?

Communication skills are essentially ‘skills’ and must be developed over time and practiced regularly. The role play scenarios in this LibGuide outline an approach for developing their
clinical communication skills away from the clinical environment where the priority is for students to cope with the fast-paced patient turnover of a clinical placement.

Reference