LOST IN A SEA OF CALLS:
GETTING A BETTER HANDLE ON MS PATIENT PHONE CALLS

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Introduction

• Telehealth is a key component of the nursing role in Multiple Sclerosis (MS) clinics.
• Patients with a chronic and neurodegenerative illness such as MS value having rapid access to a health care professional who can provide advice, guidance, and support.
• MS nurses often struggle to manage the high volume of calls from increasingly complex patients while attending to other competing job demands including seeing patients in the clinic each day.
• In order to develop patient-responsive care management systems, there is a need to better understand MS patient phone call patterns:
  - Who are the callers?
  - What are they calling about?
  - How easily and effectively can nurses help patients resolve their health issues via phone?

Methods

• A phone log was developed to evaluate:
  - Call volumes
  - The reason for the call
  - If the issue could be resolved by a nurse alone
  - Factors related to call complexity
• The data categories were based on expert clinical opinion and a review of the literature of factors related to the complex needs of MS patients.
• The two nurse clinicians in the MS clinic completed the phone log on a daily basis for a 9 month period.
• Calls included those from patients, as well as family members and caregivers.

Results

• It’s not just about calls anymore.
• 34.5% of communications are by email.
• Nurses can resolve ~1/2 of all communications.
• Complex call features:
  - Disease specific features (e.g. cognitive impairment and psychiatric co-morbidities)
  - Lack of primary care
  - High distress with insufficient coping resources
  - Mismatch between patient expectations and what the team can realistically provide.
  - Complex care coordination.

Discussion & Nursing Implications

• Data from this phone log helped inform:
  - A rapid access MS nursing phone helpline to balance patient expectations and service delivery.
  - Group teaching sessions for patients considering Alemtuzumab initiation.

Future Directions

• There is a need to further evaluate the “frequent flyer” group of patients who call the clinic on a regular basis.
  - What characteristics define these patients?
  - Could their needs be met in a different fashion?
  - What other supports and resources are needed to enhance their sense of self-efficacy and empowerment?
  - How can we support them to develop their own coping strategies?

Advances in technology have led to unrestricted access: need to redefine accessibility parameters.

References