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How well can the clinician appraise the patient's perception of the severity and impact of their back problem?

F Zaina ¹, U Mutter ², S Donzelli ¹, M Lusini ¹, F S Kleinstueck ², A F Mannion ³

Affiliations

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Abstract

Purpose: A main concern of patients with back problems is pain and its impact on function and quality of life. These are subjective phenomena, and should be probed during the clinical consultation so that the physician can ascertain the extent of the problem. This study evaluated the agreement between clinicians' and patients' independent ratings of patient status on the Core Outcome Measures Index (COMI).

Methods: This was an analysis of the data from 5 spine specialists and 108 patients, in two centres. Prior to the consultation, the patient completed the COMI. After the consultation, the clinician (blind to the patient's version) also completed a COMI. Concordance was assessed by % agreement, Kappa values, Bland-Altman plots, Spearman rank, Intraclass Correlation Coefficients and comparisons of mean values, as appropriate.

Results: Agreement regarding the "main problem" (back pain, leg/buttock pain, sensory disturbances, other) was 83%, Kappa = 0.70 (95%CI 0.58-0.81). Moderate/strong correlations were found between the doctors' and patients' COMI-item ratings (0.48-0.74; $p < 0.0001$), although compared with the patients' ratings the doctors systematically underestimated absolute values for leg pain ($p = 0.002$) and dissatisfaction with symptom state ($p = 0.002$), and overestimated how much the patient's function was impaired ($p = 0.029$).

Conclusion: The doctors were able to ascertain the location of the main problem and the multidimensional outcome score with good accuracy, but some individual domains were systematically underestimated (pain, symptom-specific well-being) or overestimated (impairment of function). More detailed/direct questioning on these domains during the consultation might deliver a better appreciation of the impact of the back problem on the patient's daily life.

Keywords: Consultation; Patient and doctor agreement; Patient-rated outcome; Quality of life.

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