

Cancer center ads focus on emotions more than facts, study finds

May 27 2014, by Amy Norton, Healthday Reporter



Researchers say it's not clear whether this sways patients when making treatment decisions.

(HealthDay)—TV and magazine ads for U.S. cancer centers are heavy on emotional appeal, but light on the facts that patients need to know, a new study finds.

In an analysis of more than 400 [ads](#) that ran nationwide, researchers found that few gave objective information on cancer treatment benefits or risks. Instead, the ads mainly used emotional appeals—relying on patient testimonials and general messages of hope.

The problem, experts said, is that the ads could potentially mislead cancer patients and their families.

Whether that's actually happening, however, is unclear.

"This study only analyzed the content of the ads," explained senior researcher Dr. Yael Schenker, an assistant professor of medicine at the University of Pittsburgh.

"This is a first step," Schenker said. "An important next step would be to look at whether there are effects on patients."

Another question, she said, is how well advertising claims correlate with a [cancer center](#)'s actual quality of care.

The study, published online May 26 in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, looked at ads for 102 cancer centers that ran in consumer magazines and on TV in 2012.

Most ads—88 percent—promoted cancer treatment, while some talked about cancer screening (18 percent) or "supportive services," such as psychological therapy or nutrition counseling (13 percent).

Most ads used emotional appeals, invoking hope for survival, rather than giving information about treatments. Only 2 percent of the ads tried to "quantify" the potential benefits of a treatment or mentioned the potential risks. Just 5 percent talked about costs.

Instead, Schenker's team found, nearly half of the ads used patient testimonials, and none mentioned the results that the "typical" patient could expect.

A cancer specialist who was not involved in the research agreed that studies now need to see whether these ads sway patients' choices.

"The next step would be to ask a cohort of [cancer patients](#) if they are aware of cancer center advertisements, and try to assess if their exposure to the ads has affected their feelings and behavior," said Dr. Gregory

Abel, of the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston.

Of course, Abel pointed out, advertising for a cancer center is more complicated than advertising for a drug—where, for instance, the potential side effects can be neatly summed up during the commercial.

Regulators could consider banning cancer center ads altogether, Abel noted in an editorial published with the study. But, he added, that would erase the possible benefits of the ads—like their potential to "destigmatize" cancer and to offer people information they want.

In a 2009 survey, Abel and his colleagues found that only 11 percent of patients currently undergoing [cancer treatment](#) thought cancer center ads should be banned.

For now, Abel and Schenker said the public should be aware that [cancer](#) center ads are unlikely to give them the straight facts.

"Just be aware that these ads focus on [emotional appeal](#)," Schenker said. "They're not going to give you balanced information on treatments, risks and costs."

Where do you get that information? "You can talk with a doctor you trust," Schenker suggested. "That's a good place to start."

More information: The U.S. National Cancer Institute has resources for [finding cancer treatment](#).

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Citation: Cancer center ads focus on emotions more than facts, study finds (2014, May 27) retrieved 25 April 2024 from

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