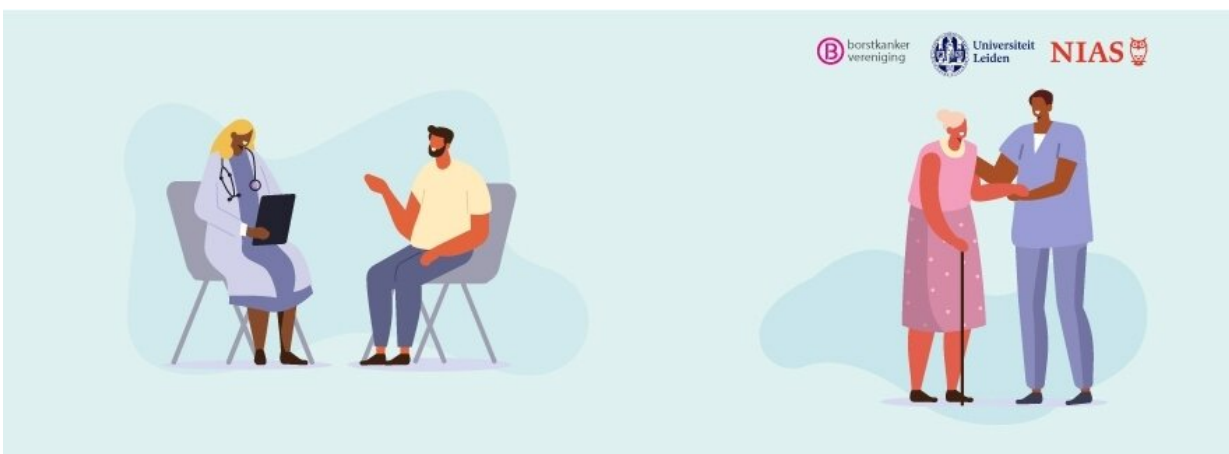


Researchers study effectiveness of communication strategies with seriously ill patients

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Credit: Leiden University

Leiden psychologists Janine Westendorp and Liesbeth van Vliet have investigated types of communication that seriously ill patients may experience as harmful. The results of this research were published in the journal *Cancer*. And the results have now also been published as a poster.

This poster can now easily be integrated into communication training courses for [healthcare providers](#). The QR code on the poster leads to the scientific study including the results table, with further examples of

harmful communication and helpful alternatives.

'How do you feel?'

In their research, and now on the poster, Janine Westendorp and Liesbeth van Vliet highlight a number of obviously harmful situations, such as failing to show an interest in the person themselves, or giving information without being empathetic. Moreover, much harmful [communication](#) turns out to be fairly easy to prevent.

For example, the poster shows that giving a well-intentioned compliment can be perceived as harmful. "You look well," does not necessarily correspond to how the patient actually feels. "Some patients even perceive such statements as giving them no room to indicate that in fact they don't feel well at all," Van Vliet points out. According to the researchers, it's not that the compliment should be avoided altogether, but it is important to subsequently also ask the patient whether they feel as well as they look.

We will still be there for you

The results table contains the dreaded sentence "There is nothing more we can do for you," which can be experienced as harmful by patients. Westendorp says, "When anti-cancer treatments no longer work, there are always other things that can be done for patients, such as [medication](#) to reduce symptoms or psychological counseling to help them process the situation. It is important to stress this: 'We will continue seeing you.'"

On the poster and the accompanying table, Westendorp and Van Vliet provide a clear overview of which harmful expressions can be avoided and also offer a concrete constructive alternative.

More information: Janine Westendorp et al, Mind your words: Oncologists' communication that potentially harms patients with advanced cancer: A survey on patient perspectives, *Cancer* (2021). [DOI: 10.1002/cncr.34018](https://doi.org/10.1002/cncr.34018)

[Poster available as PDF](#)

[Results table](#)

Provided by Leiden University

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