Pilot study of a clinical psychology service via videoconferencing for rural cancer patients in Australia

David Goldstein, Louise Shepherd, Prince of Wales Hospital, Hayley Whitford, Royal Adelaide Hospital Cancer Centre, Vicki Brummell, Glenn Innes Area Health Service, Belinda Thewes, Prince of Wales Hospital, Mary Hicks, New England Area Health Service

Purpose
This project was initiated to trial access for rural cancer patients to a clinical psychologist via videoconferencing to help reduce the psychological burden of cancer.

Methods
Adult cancer patients living in the rural New England region of New South Wales who were screened and considered highly distressed by the Distress Thermometer, or who were referred by clinicians, were offered cognitive behavioural therapy by a clinical psychologist specialising in psycho-oncology via videoconferencing facilities based in Sydney. Patients’ anxiety, depression and quality of life were assessed pre and post intervention and at a one-month follow-up. Patient satisfaction with the service was assessed post intervention.

Results
Fifty-four patients were referred over a nine-month period, 34 patients commenced treatment and 25 completed follow-up. One-hour individual sessions were held weekly or fortnightly for between one and six sessions. Results indicated a significant decrease in anxiety (p=.01), and significant increases in emotional well-being (p=.003), functional well-being (p=.02) and overall quality of life (p=.04). Overall, patients found the intervention to have a positive impact (92%) and would recommend the service to others (96%).

Conclusions
Videoconferencing appears to provide an innovative mode of delivery for necessary psychological intervention to patients with cancer living in remote vicinities. Larger studies are needed to adequately assess videoconferencing such as randomised controlled trials comparing face-to-face and videoconferencing, including assessment of confounding variables like demographic and treatment characteristics.

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Reference

Presenter
David Goldstein is a medical oncologist with a strong interest in psycho-oncology and rural issues. He has a number of publications from his research in psycho-oncology and is an active clinician working full time in clinical practice at Prince of Wales Hospital. He also is a visiting medical oncologist to Tamworth Base Hospital.