

IMPACT PROFILE

Impact of Physicians' Words on Patient Decision Making

While most patients value and trust their doctor's opinion, there is a need to expand the tools doctors use to maintain that trust.

The Challenge

Because surgery is a major procedure that requires anesthesia and relies heavily on the doctor's expertise, patients often feel they need to trust their surgeon's advice on what is best for them. Surgeons often recognize that patient's decisions can be swayed based on how information is presented and may change as patients consider new information or experience different situations. The degree to which this can occur has not been studied, and it is not clear whether patients appreciate when surgeons 'nudge' them into certain treatment paths.

The Approach

Survey Design:

- Patients imagined their child being diagnosed with acute appendicitis and discussed two treatments: antibiotics or surgery.

Randomization:

- Caregivers received a script nudging them towards either antibiotics or surgery. Nudging included techniques like framing statistics and mentioning relevant complications.

Data Collection:

- Reported caregiver treatment preferences, used and trusted healthcare resources, and what role the physician should play in decision making.

The Impact

Our research demonstrated that patients valued their doctor's opinion on the best treatment path for their child. As a result, many patients are willing to change their preferred treatment course to align with their physician's recommendation. However, it is concerning that physicians might use nudges for personal gain, which is unethical. Nudges are appropriate when they guide patients towards a treatment that aligns with their own beliefs, supporting shared decision-making. While doctors and professional organizations are trusted, they are under-utilized for health information acquisition. Increased access for caregivers to high-quality healthcare information from providers would further support shared decision-making and empower caregivers in their healthcare decisions.

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- **91%** of caregivers appreciated when a doctor helped them in their treatment decision.
- **88%** of caregivers preferred a human being as a healthcare provider, as opposed to a robot, even if it meant they would make a mistake.

Key Benefits

The study resulted in **Clinical and Community** benefits.



Clinical

Shared-Decision Making: Employing nudging helps patients simplify complex treatment decisions. (*Demonstrated*)



Clinical

Shared-Decision Making: Nudging, when done with patient-oriented goals, is valued by patients in making complex treatment decisions. (*Demonstrated*)



Community

Health education resources: Improving quality and accessibility of healthcare information could empower further ethical shared-decision making. (*Potential*)

The team:

Christopher Noda, MD; Nicole Santucci, MD; Darby Le, BA; Katie Rowland, MD

Contact:

cnoda@wustl.edu