Therapeutic Alliance in Family Medicine: The Working Alliance Inventory in Consultations Between Patients and General Practitioners

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Context: Patient-centered care is related to better health outcomes, greater patient satisfaction, and reduced health care costs. If we want to think about incentives for patient-centered care performance, we need to study the processes of patient-centered care, their determining factors and how to enhance them. One of the core components of patient-centered care, defined in the patient-centered clinical method, is enhancing the patient-doctor relationship. Other fields, such as rehabilitation and psychotherapy have specifically studied the therapeutic relationship and have developed measures of the therapeutic alliance, such as the Working Alliance Inventory (WAI).

Onderzoeksvraag: In this study we aim to measure the therapeutic alliance in a selection of consultations between patients and general practitioners, and explore which patient, provider and practice characteristics are associated with the strength of the therapeutic alliance.

Methode: STUDY DESIGN: cross-sectional cohort study METHODS: 170 patient-doctor contacts were randomly selected in four practices. The patients and general practitioners completed a survey after the consultation. The survey consisted of the Working Alliance Inventory for General Practice (WAI-GP), as well as physician characteristics (age, sex, number of years in practice), patient characteristics (age, sex, morbidity), consultation characteristics (reason for encounter, consultation/house call, number of annual contacts between patient and doctor) and variables related to the patient-doctor relationship (duration of the therapeutic relationship, whether or not the patient got to consult their preferred doctor).

Resultaten: Data was collected for 170 patients. The median WAI-GP score reported after these consultations was 4.5 ±0.62. Higher WAI-GP scores were reported for consultations with male doctors (p=0.008), and by older patients (p=0.000). In the subsample of patients with a chronic illness, higher WAI-GP scores were reported by patients who had more than 10 follow-up consultations per year (p=0.026).

Conclusie: This study showed that a higher number of contacts in patients with a chronic illness was related to a stronger therapeutic alliance, more specifically patients who had to consult with their GP more than 10 times a year tended to score significantly higher than patients who consulted less. Additionally, we found that female doctors tended to receive lower scores, and younger patients tended to give lower scores. If we wish to explore whether the WAI-GP could be used as a quality indicator for processes of patient-centered care, further research will be necessary to better understand how the measure performs in relation to variables that are beyond control, such as the sex of the physician, age of the patient and variables related to building continuity of care.