

Testing the Effects of Telephone Counseling to Assist Surrogate Decision Makers at End-of-Life

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Background/Rationale: Surrogates often are required to make intensely difficult and stressful end-of-life decisions for their incapacitated ill-family members. In many cases, only limited and fragmented support is available from healthcare providers. Telephone counseling with surrogates offers the advantages of increased frequency and quality of contacts at times that are convenient for them and for healthcare providers.

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to discuss methodological and ethical issues related to the use of telephone counseling with family surrogate decision makers for the terminally ill.

Previous Studies: Descriptive studies have shown that poor communication with healthcare providers leads to family dissatisfaction with end-of-life care. Experimental studies of interventions to improve family satisfaction with end-of-life care have been limited. Research testing telephone support for family caregivers has been a fruitful area of investigation. This paper will include some promising results of a small feasibility study designed to examine the use of a telephone-delivered counseling intervention for surrogate decision makers at the end-of-life.

Special Issues With This Population: Family members are frequently put into a surrogate decision-making role for which they have had no preparation. Because surrogates often live at long distances from critical care settings, they may be unavailable for consistent face-to-face counseling.

Methods Used In This Study: The doctoral dissertation study will be an expansion of the feasibility study. Repeated measures of depression, anxiety, personal control, and satisfaction with end-of-life care will be analyzed. Sixty surrogate decision makers will be randomly assigned to either an experimental intervention group or a usual care group. Subjects may choose either face-to-face counseling or telephone counseling. In the feasibility study most subjects chose telephone counseling.

Challenges Associated With The Telephone Intervention Method: Although the research was approved, the Institutional Review Board expressed a concern that traditional counselors often raise about telephone counseling: Is it ethical to offer only telephone counseling to potentially distressed individuals when face-to-face counseling would be possible? The argument implied by this question will be analyzed and the solution of giving participants the option to choose face-to-face counseling will be debated.

