

Research at a Glance

Patient-centered family conferences can boost satisfaction with pediatric ICU care

What's known:

Family conferences in the pediatric intensive care unit (PICU) cover difficult decisions made on behalf of critically ill children, such as starting or withdrawing life support, placing a tracheostomy, or repeating bone marrow transplantation. Family satisfaction is a national quality indicator for determining excellence of care, and families rate communication as one of physicians' most important skills. Researchers sought to clarify the association between the patient-centered nature of physicians' communication patterns and the degree to which parents were satisfied with decision-making during family conferences in the PICU.

What's new:

A research team led by Children's National Health System staff recorded 39 family conferences to dissect the dynamics of the conversations. The conferences averaged 45 minutes in length, and the medical team spoke 73 percent of the time. Physicians contributed 89 percent of the dialogue; bedside nurses spoke 2 percent of the conversation. The team used the Roter Interaction Analysis System and a related patient-centeredness score to evaluate the conversations. A patient-centeredness score higher than 0.75 predicted parental satisfaction, controlling for the length of the conference, the severity of the child's illness, race, and socioeconomic status.

Skills: Partnering and activation, asking for patient opinion, asking for understanding

- Doctor: What do you think would help?
- Doctor: Do you follow me?
- Doctor: Let me make sure I've got what you meant. Your preference would be to place the trach if we can't get the breathing tube out on this third try?

Questions for future research:

- Q:** How do parents' perceptions change when additional members of the medical team speak during family conferences?
- Q:** How does the manner in which parents process information, e.g., cognitive processing vs. psychomotor processing, impact their preference for more patient-centered family conferences?