Reviewer’s report

Title: Breaking bad news in assisted reproductive technology: a proposal for guidelines

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Reviewer: Debbie Payne

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Journal: Reproductive Health

Article: Breaking bad news in ART: a proposal for guidelines

Thank you for the opportunity to review this paper which explores an important and understudied area of assisted reproductive technology practice. It presents a qualitative study that aimed to explore the applicability of the SPIKES protocol to the assisted reproductive technology (ART) setting when delivering 'bad news'. Bad news is defined as "any information likely to drastically alter the patient's view of his or her future". Buckman's SPIKES protocol is used the oncology setting and provides a practitioner a six step process to follow when delivering bad news to a patient. Over a half day workshop, the authors used three phases to elicit a group of 13 ART practitioners' views as to whether SPIKES protocol could be used in their setting. The first phase involved the administration of a Critical Incident Review to the practitioners to complete individually. Second, their responses were then discussed by the whole group, synthesised, and then used to guide the third phase; a focus group. In the focus group the SPIKES protocol's six steps were discussed in relation to the ART setting. The focus group was audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically. The authors found that the ART setting differs in multiple ways to that of the oncology setting, the protocol could be applicable.

Comments

Abstract: The results section of the abstract seem to focus more on the uniqueness of the ART setting. I suggest that it be reworked to provide more of a balanced overview of the findings.

Recruitment: While snowball sampling is identified, more clarity about how the participants were recruited is needed. For example, how did they find out about the study? Did they come from one institution, organisation or geographical area?

Ethics: It is not clear if ethical approval for the study was obtained. Were the participants provided with full information prior to their choosing to take part in the study? Did they know they were taking part in a study?

Data collection: The researchers used a novel staged process to collect their data. Overall each stage is sufficiently described for the readers except for the third stage - the focus group.
Thirteen participants in a focus group seems quite a large number, usually it is recommended that focus groups are kept to 6-8 participants. It is not clear how the researchers managed the discussion and ensured that participants (particularly the one patient) felt fully comfortable ('safe') to contribute their views. For example, did they establish ground rules?

Given that translating from one language to another is not a straight word for word process, were the interviews carried out in English? Or were they carried out in Italian? If the latter, how did the researchers manage the translation of the transcription or data excerpts?

Data analysis: The third stage of the study process is fully and clearly described. However the information for the first part is relatively sparse but probably sufficient.

Results: The results are presented in two sections: how the ART setting differs and how Buckman's six steps apply. Each section has succinct thematic statements each followed by relatively large chunks of excerpts to illustrate each theme.

Discussion: the study findings are discussed and linked to relevant literature.

**Level of interest**
Please indicate how interesting you found the manuscript:

An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English**
Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Needs some language corrections before being published

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