The effect of advance care planning on the family carers’ involvement in decision-making, and their psychological distress: results of the ACTION trial

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Abstract

Context. Facilitated advance care planning (ACP) helps family carers’ to be aware of patient preferences. It can improve family carers’ involvement in decision-making and their overall experiences at the end-of-life, as well as, reduce psychological stress.

Objectives. To investigate the effects of the ACTION Respecting Choices (RC) ACP intervention on the family carers’ involvement in decision-making in the last three months of the patients’ life and on the family carers’ psychological distress after three months of bereavement.

Methods. Over six European countries a sample of 162 bereaved family carers returned a bereavement questionnaire. Involvement in decision-making was measured with a single item of the VOICES-SF questionnaire. Psychological distress was measured with the impact of event scale (IES).

Results. No significant effect was found on family carers involvement in decision-making in the last 3 months of the patients’ life (95%-CI=0.449–4.097). However, the probability of involvement in decision-making was slightly higher in the intervention arm of the study (89.6% vs 86.7%; OR=1.357). Overall, no statistical difference was found between intervention and control group regarding the IES (M = 34.1 (1.7) vs. 31.8 (1.5); (95%CI = -2.2–6.8)).

Conclusion. The ACTION RC ACP intervention showed no significant effect on family carers’ involvement in decision-making or on subsequent psychological distress. More research is needed about 1) how family carers can be actively involved in ACP-conversations, and 2) how to prepare family carers on their role in decision-making.

Key words: Advance Care Planning, randomized controlled trial, family carers, involvement in decision-making, psychological distress, advanced cancer

What was already known:
- Family carers’ have a prominent role in decision-making
- Facilitated ACP improves the family carers’ well-being

What are the new findings:
- No significant effect in family carers’ involvement in decision-making
- No significant effect on family carers’ level of psychological distress

What is the significance:
Clinical
- Family carers need to be more empowered and prepared for their role as SDM during ACP
• A whole system-approach is necessary for successful implementation of ACP Research
• Future research should focus on developing a family-focused ACP-model in addition to the current patient-centred ACP models.
• Future ACP research should focus on a consistent way of measuring psychological distress for family carers
Introduction

Cancer is a common life-limiting disease, with about 4 million new diagnoses and 2 million deaths annually in the European Union. Timely and efficient communication is necessary between clinicians, patients and their family carers, about future care, including care at the end-of-life in patients living with cancer. One approach to facilitate this is advance care planning (ACP) which ‘enables individuals to define goals and preferences for future medical treatment and care, to discuss these goals and preferences with family and health care professionals, and to record and review these preferences if appropriate’. In addition to promoting communication, ACP facilitates shared decision-making and, above all, aligns end-of-life care with patients’ preferences. This includes the assignment of a surrogate decision-maker (SDM), if the patient loses decisional capacity. Family carers have a prominent role in the process of decision-making at the end of life, but making these decisions without knowledge about the patients’ preferences can be extremely stressful. Studies in Australia and the US have found that facilitated ACP improved the family carer’s well-being, satisfaction with hospital care and confidence in making decisions.

The ACTION-study was the first and largest European phase III multicenter cluster randomized controlled trial, to test the efficacy of an ACP intervention in patients with advanced lung or colorectal cancer. A systematic review showed that the Respecting Choices (RC) program was one of the most promising ACP-programs with the best evidence for beneficial effects of ACP. The RC was developed in the US and successfully trialled in a geriatric setting in Australia. In the ACTION trial, the ACP intervention (ACTION Respecting Choices (RC) ACP intervention), was an adapted and integrated version of RC program, and consisted of a trained facilitator, using scripted conversation guides, to assist the person with cancer and their family carer to discuss goals, values, beliefs and preferences regarding their future treatment and care. However, the ACTION trial found no significant effects on patients’ quality of life, symptoms, satisfaction with care, coping or shared decision-making. In this paper we report on the secondary outcomes of the ACTION-study regarding the effect of the ACTION RC ACP intervention on family carer’s involvement in decision-making in the last three months of patients’ life, and psychological distress after three months of bereavement.
Methods

Study design
We analysed data of the bereavement questionnaire from the ACTION-study which was a multicentre cluster-randomised controlled trial in six European countries (Belgium, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Slovenia and the United Kingdom). Detailed information about the intervention and the trial procedures can be found in the protocol paper or in appendix 1.

Setting and participants
In total, 1117 persons with advanced lung or colorectal cancer participated in the ACTION study. The specific inclusion criteria for patients are described in the protocol paper. The inclusion criteria for bereaved family carers’ were: being older than 18 years, being able to complete the bereavement questionnaire in the language of each country and not taking part in another study that is evaluating palliative care services or communication interventions. A bereavement questionnaire was sent with a cover letter, information sheet and prepaid envelope. A reminder was sent when the questionnaire was not returned after two weeks. Return and completion of the questionnaire were considered to indicate that family carers had consented to participate in the study.

Outcome measures
The main purpose of the bereavement questionnaire was to obtain more information about the last months and weeks of the patients’ life as perceived by a bereaved family carer who lost the patient during the one year of inclusion in the study. Involvement in decision-making was measured with a single item of the Views of Informal Carers – Evaluation of Services Short Form (VOICES-SF) questionnaire, which is a 58-item validated questionnaire about health and social services completed by bereaved family carers. The item used was: “Looking back over the last three months of his/her life, were you involved in decisions about his/her care as much as you would have wanted?”. Possible responses were: 1) I was involved as much as I wanted to be, 2) I would have liked to be more involved, 3) I would have liked to be less involved, 4) Don’t know. Psychological distress was assessed using the impact of event scale (IES) and asked how frequently each item was experienced during the past week after 3 months of bereavement. The IES measures psychological responses to stress on two subscales: (1) intrusion and (2) avoidance and is mostly used to measure post-traumatic stress syndrome. Each item could be rated with 1) not at all, 2) rarely, 3) sometimes and 4) often. During the ACTION-study no baseline measurement or other follow-up questionnaire was sent to the family carer.
Statistical analysis

Multilevel analyses were used to determine the effect of ACP on involvement in decision-making (via multilevel binary logistic regression) and the effect of ACP on psychological distress among family carers (via multilevel linear regression).

Ethics

Ethical approval has been obtained from research ethics committees and ethical review boards of all participating hospitals in all countries. Trial registration: International Standard Randomised Controlled Trial Number (ISRCTN), 17231

Results

Sample characteristics

A total of 390 patients died in the year of inclusion, indicating that 390 bereavement questionnaires were distributed over six European countries. Only 162 returned: 71 for the intervention group; 91 for the control group (response rate: 41.5%). For 60 out of 71 patients in the intervention group (84.5%), the family carer had been present during the ACP-conversations.

The majority of family carers were female (71.0%), had an average age of 60 (SD: 11.87) and were a partner (70.2%) of the deceased patient. The majority of the deceased patients were approximately 66 years (SD: 9.55), male (64.2%) and died from lung cancer (62.3%). See Appendix 2 for table: sample characteristics.

Family carers’ involvement in decision-making and psychological distress

The probability that family carers had been involved in medical decision making with the patient during the last three months of life was slightly higher in the intervention group (89.6%) than in the control group (86.7%), but not statistically significant (OR 1.357, 95%-CI = 0.449 – 4.097).

The intervention group had a slightly higher mean score (M = 34.07; SD = 14.61) on the IES, meaning a higher level of psychological distress, than the control group (M = 31.77, SD= 14.11). However, this difference was not statistically significant either (t(157)= 1.005, 95%-CI = -2.224 – 6.836) (see Table 1).

Table 1: effect of ACP on involvement in decision-making and effect of ACP on psychological distress (measured with IES)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>involvement in decision-making</th>
<th>Psychological distress (IES)</th>
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Multilevel binary logistic regression analysis was used to measure the involvement in decision-making. Not included in the analysis were the responses: I would have liked to be less involved N = 0 (0%) and I don’t know N = 4 (2.5%) and missing values N = 1 (0.6%). Multilevel linear regression analysis was used in order to measure psychological distress, measured with the IES. a Possible range impact of events is 0-75. Missing items were replaced by the mean of the other items for that family carer.

Discussion and conclusion

The ACTION RC ACP intervention did not significantly affect family carers’ involvement in decision-making in the last 3 months of patients’ life, nor their level of psychological distress after three months of bereavement.

Several hypotheses can explain these results. The ACTION RC ACP intervention was delivered by a trained external facilitator. These facilitators had no contact with the patients’ health care professionals and were also not allowed to add information about the ACP-conversation to the medical file of the patient. Participating patients were encouraged by the facilitators to communicate their preferences themselves to their health care professionals, but only few patients reported to have done so13. Previous studies have already shown that physicians’ awareness of the patients’ end-of-life care preferences did not improve when ACP conversations were conducted by nurses or other facilitators when these were not integrated into routine services, and it was suggested that a more interdisciplinary collaboration is needed14. Standardization is necessary in a research context in 6 different EU countries. Because of this, the ACTION RC ACP intervention was not integrated with routine services, and thus it might have reduced its effects10. Probably a whole system-approach is necessary for ACP to be successful, which means that on an individual level, patients and their family carers are provided with the opportunity to have timely conversations, facilitated by skilled staff. It also means that on the
system or health care service level appropriate policies and systems are in place to ensure that ACP is offered to patients and their family carers, and that previously discussed wishes and preferences are available to all involved health care professionals. For future research, we would recommend exploring all options for broader involvement at the institutional level.

Moreover, although ACP needs to be patient-centred, family carers also need to be empowered and prepared for their role as SDM, which was possibly not sufficiently addressed in the ACTION RC ACP intervention. Little is known about how family carers should be optimally involved in ACP-conversations. Future research should focus on developing a family-focused ACP-model in addition to the current patient-centred ACP models.

Lastly, increasing literature is questioning whether ACP has the capacity to address goal-concordant care, which leads to a discussion about what the right outcome measures in ACP research ought to be. Rather than focusing on making binding decisions early on, ACP should be seen as a process that facilitates patients, families and professionals to prepare for making better "in-the-moment" decisions. Consequently, outcomes of ACP should concentrate more on its process, and thus on the relation domain (e.g. patients and family carers discussing preferences, values and wishes with each other and preparing them for future conversations with professionals). However, this was not assessed in the ACTION trial. As for the results of this secondary analysis, other studies in ACP have measured well-being and psychological distress differently and currently, there is no univocal measurement or conclusion on the appropriateness of these outcome measures. Future research should focus on a consistent way of measuring well-being and psychological distress of family carers after ACP. More specifically, qualitative research could enhance our understanding of the well-being and psychological distress of the family carer when engaging in ACP, as well as identify other relevant outcomes for patients and family carers.

This study has several strengths. First, the ACTION study is the first and largest RCT on the effects of ACP for patients with advanced cancer, and their family carers in Europe. Second, to study the effect of ACP for bereaved family carers, we sent out a bereavement questionnaire using items from the VOICES-SF and two validated scales measuring psychological distress, anxiety and depression symptoms.

The study has also some limitations. First, the response rate was modest in each of the 6 countries. As a result, between-country comparisons were not possible due to the low statistical power. Possible causes of non-response were that bereaved family carers were not interested in participating in the study anymore; and/or that the questionnaire was sent to the address of the deceased person, which was not always the address of the family carer. There was no further follow-up of the non-responders, which makes it difficult to understand family carers' reasons for not responding. Second, a limited number of characteristics of the bereaved family carers were
collected in the ACTION study, therefore we do not know whether the family carer who filled out the bereavement questionnaire was the appointed SDM of the patient.

Acknowledgement

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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