



Creating Awareness Affects Women's Utilization of Colonoscopy Screenings

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When Gastroenterology of the Rockies and Boulder Community Hospital recently launched a women-focused public education effort about colorectal cancer, the campaign did more than raise local awareness – it also increased colonoscopy screening rates. These results indicate that patient education can have a sizable impact on reducing barriers to colonoscopy (and other beneficial screenings). By inference, this campaign provides strong anecdotal evidence that primary care physicians can positively impact patient behavior by addressing legitimate patient concerns about referred medical procedures.

In December 2005, Gastroenterology of the Rockies (GOR) and Boulder Community Hospital (BCH) began a public education campaign urging women to get a colorectal cancer screening. During this four-month campaign, there was an overall 15 percent increase in the average number of colonoscopy screenings performed at GOR. There were also more female patient referrals than ever before.

Considering that fewer than half of all women 50 years or older are appropriately screened for colorectal cancer—the third-leading cause of cancer death in women—the results of this public education effort are significant.

The education campaign was preceded by secondary research into colonoscopy screening rates. The results were surprising. While more than 80 percent of women are compliant with screening mammography and about 70 percent with Pap smears, only around 45 percent followed physician (and American Cancer Society) recommendations to have a screening colonoscopy. Consumer research techniques had identified the major issues behind this disparity. First, many women consider colorectal cancer to be a man's disease. (This misunderstanding is, some believe, an unintended consequence of the large-scale





Peter Kaye, MD, and colonoscopy party patients make a celebratory toast before their procedures. The martini glasses are filled with patient gifts.

and successful public education efforts to make women aware of the dangers of breast and cervical cancer. The lack of a comparable national education campaign which focuses on colorectal cancer could imply to some women that CRC is not a major health issue.)

Our second major finding was that the colonoscopy process was not well understood by the public, resulting in unwarranted fear about pain during the procedure and elements of the preparation for the procedure.

Responding to this research, GOR and BCH developed a public awareness campaign centered on an educational component that would help women identify their risk for the disease; reduce the stigma and fear around colonoscopy; and motivate a change in patient behavior.

Elements of public education campaign

The public education effort included multiple channels:

- Newspaper advertisements
- Banners set up in key hospital and medical office locations
- Literature/pamphlets
- Web pages focused on colorectal cancer
- Educational articles in magazines

The most unusual aspect of the effort was a “Women’s Colonoscopy Party” designed specifically to attract news media attention and make the colorectal cancer message more memorable. GOR offered a host of amenities for this event – participants would be transported to the Endoscopy Center in a limousine and pampered with facials and massages prior to their colonoscopy. Using only the GOR web site and the hospital’s employee newsletter, we were able to recruit 12 patients in a few days. Discussion with participants indicated that for many in that group, the party was the little push they had needed to take a potentially life-saving action they had been delaying because of the concerns previously noted in this article.

Impact of awareness

- Public education had a significant and positive impact over a short period of time.
- Colonoscopy screenings rose 15 percent during the prime phase of the awareness campaign.
- Scheduling rate spiked for two weeks after the colonoscopy party media event.

The colonoscopy party served its intended purpose. Denver’s 9News covered the event, running the report for four days.

(View the 9News coverage on www.gastrorockies.com.) Boulder’s Daily Camera newspaper ran a photograph from the event.

After the colonoscopy party, there was a two-week spike in the scheduling of colonoscopies and in traffic to the practice’s web site.

Physician messages can influence patient behavior

The results of the awareness campaign underscore that patient education can have a sizable impact on patient behavior, in this case reducing barriers to colonoscopy. By inference, this campaign provides strong anecdotal evidence that primary care physicians can positively impact patient behavior by addressing legitimate patient concerns about medical procedures. While such dialogue is admittedly time-consuming, there is great potential positive impact on patients through expanded utilization of proven screenings and early identification of developing health issues.

GOR and BCH will continue to work with the community and medical partners to raise awareness of colorectal cancer. We are happy to provide free copies of our educational brochure for your patients. Your office can obtain bulk copies of the “Woman’s Guide to Understanding Colorectal Cancer” brochure by calling the hospital’s Public Relations Department at 303-441-0502.

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