Does health message framing affect behavioural intentions in psoriasis patients? An experimental study

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BACKGROUND: Message framing plays an important role in health communication research. Prospect theory argues messages can emphasise either the benefits (gained-framed) of behaviour change, or costs (loss-framed) of failure to act. Research around the relative efficacy of approaches is inconclusive and mostly based on hypothetical risk scenarios. Lifestyle behaviour change (LBC) is central to psoriasis management, improving disease outcomes and reducing associated cardiovascular disease (CVD) risk. Whether people are motivated to make positive lifestyle changes through a desire to improve psoriasis or reduce CVD risk, or whether message framing is effective in psoriasis patients is unknown.

AIMS: This study aimed to examine: (1) whether gain- or loss-framed messages are more effective for prompting changes in behavioural intentions (BI), (2) are BI driven by a desire to improve psoriasis outcomes or reduce CVD risk; and (3) whether people show emotional responses to differently framed health risk information.

METHODS: A 2 (message frame: loss vs. gain) X 2 (message focus: psoriasis symptom reduction vs. CVD risk reduction) between-participants design was used. Participants (n=217) were randomly allocated to one of four evidence-based health messages as part of an online questionnaire. BI was the independent variable.

RESULTS: A significant frame X focus interaction was found for BI to reduce alcohol intake (p=.037); loss-framed messages were more effective when providing information about CVD risk reduction, and gain-framed messages were more effective when providing information about psoriasis symptom reduction. There was also a significant main effect for message focus in participants emotional response to the information (p=.02); participants demonstrated an increased emotional response when presented with information about CVD risk reduction, compared to information about psoriasis symptom reduction. BI for increased exercise, stopping smoking and improving diet was not statistically significant.

CONCLUSION: Message frame should be considered depending on the health benefit being emphasised. Patient-tailored health messages in psoriasis populations may increase the likelihood of message effectiveness for alcohol reduction.