“This is more stuff I’ve got to include in my life”. Psoriasis patients’ experience of cardiovascular disease risk assessment: A qualitative study

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BACKGROUND: Psoriasis is associated with high levels of engagement in unhealthy lifestyle behaviours, including those leading to an increased risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD). Messages which aim to increase awareness of personal risk may be perceived as a threat and therefore increase defensive responses. Self-affirmation theory suggests that individuals try to maintain a perceived sense of worth. Threatening health messages, such as a raised awareness of a CVD risk factor, may endanger perceived worth, and individuals may respond in ways which downplay the threat or interfere with processing of accurate information. However, when feelings of self-worth are maintained, individuals are more likely to undertake risk reduction behaviours.

AIM: Using self-affirmation as an underlying theoretical framework, the aim of this study was to explore the understanding and experiences of CVD risk assessment in individuals with psoriasis.

METHODS: In-depth interviews were conducted with 29 people (30-74 years old; female n=18; male n=11) with psoriasis who had previously participated in an audio-recorded CVD risk assessment consultation. “Tape-assisted recall” methods, in which excerpts of the recorded consultation are replayed during the follow-up interview, were used to steer questioning. Data were analysed using principles of Framework Analysis to generate key themes.

RESULTS: Two overarching themes were identified: (i) patients believed that they learned very little new information about their personal CVD risk or how to reduce it. Health messages were often perceived by patients as a reiteration of information that was known already, or were thought to be ambiguous; and (ii) patients commonly reported strong emotional reactions to discussions about risk. Patients experienced CVD assessment discussions as emotionally laden, and would often leave the consultation feeling additionally burdened by the need to change their behaviour. Some patients reported that they were reassured about their CVD risk and in some cases the assessment resulted in feeling motivated to make lifestyle changes.

CONCLUSION: Risk discussions during consultations about CVD risk with people with psoriasis may be ineffective due to additional perceived burden of behavioural change, or the sense of threat to self. A heightened emotional state during the assessments may also interfere with information processing. Clinician training focusing on identifying problematic emotions and appropriate use of self-affirmation techniques could improve the effectiveness of CVD risk assessment with psoriasis patients.