Ease of reading: evaluating clinical data accessibility through the use of graphical abstracts and plain language summaries, a case study of Parkinson’s disease publications

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Publication professionals are uniquely positioned to drive the use of plain-language content (PLC) to promote clinical data transparency and accessibility, accordant with Good Publication Practice (GPP) 2022. The dearth of plain language summaries and graphical abstracts in clinical trial publications for Parkinson’s disease (PD), a therapeutic area with robust patient engagement, may serve as a sign for the need for greater use of accessible content across all disease areas.

Introduction

- The use of PLC, such as graphical abstracts (GA) and plain-language summaries (PLS), and multichannel mode may facilitate clinical data dissemination to patients, caregivers, and healthcare professionals (HCPs) alike and has become an increasing focus in medical publications.
- In therapeutic areas with robust patient engagement, such as PD, use of PLS and other types of enhanced content may be particularly important to improve and promote clinical data transparency and accessibility.

Objective

- We examined the use of enhanced content and multichannel media in clinical PD publications.
- For each of the journals identified, we used PubMed and the following parameters to identify those journals that published ≥40 articles:
  - Search terms limited to manuscript type “randomized controlled trial”
  - Search period: January 1, 2020 to January 31, 2022
  - Articles reporting PD clinical data were manually screened for:
    - Inclusion of GA and PLS by 2 authors
    - Freely available articles were assessed, including review of the supplementary information to identify holder PLC.
- Results:
  - 17% of journals included GA and 8% included PLS.

Research design & methods

- Using Journal Selector (Olygo, an Argo Software Company), we identified journals that published PD literature using the major Medical Subject Heading “Parkinson disease” for the period December 1, 2019 to November 30, 2022.
- Journals that did not permit the use of PLS or GA were excluded.

Conclusions

- Aligned with current GPP guidelines, journals are predisposed to foster improved data accessibility through multiple plain-language formats and channels.
- Publication professionals can encourage the use of such options to improve data accessibility for patients, caregivers, and HCPs alike.
- Barriers to the use of PLC and open-accessibility may include a lack of funding and resources, insufficient planning, or lack of awareness of the benefits of both PLS and GA for improving data transparency.

Discussion

- Because our analysis was conducted only in articles in PD, the results should not be extrapolated to other therapeutic areas.
- Since the direction to include PLC is new to GPP guidelines, the first appearing in the 2022 update, a similar analysis at a later time may yield different results.
- Given this, our results may serve as a baseline for future investigations, including assessment of the impact of GPP 2022 on use of PLC.
- Adoption of GA and PLS appears to be in its nascent stage but can be improved through concerted efforts of authors, pharmaceutical companies, and publication planning agencies.

Recommendations

- Encourage the selection of target journals that offer GA and PLS, utilizing tools such as the Medical Publishing Insights and Practices Enhanced Publications Options Navigator (MPIPON)³.
- Become familiar with plain-language guidelines, such as those available from the Plain Language Action and Information Network⁴.
- Test the readability of your text using tools such as the Flesch-Kincaid grade level⁴.
- Pharmaceutical companies should work to foster accessibility of PLC on medical information/ pharmaceutical company websites, as appropriate.

Results

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