RESEARCH LETTER

Do Clinicians Tell Patients They Have Prehypertension?

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Background: The clinical utility of the prehypertension label is questionable. We sought to estimate how often patients with prehypertension are being told about it by their primary care clinicians.

Methods: We conducted a cross-sectional study of adult patients visiting practices within the North Carolina Family Medicine Research Network in summer 2008. Non-hypertensive patients were asked whether a doctor or other health care provider had ever told them they had “prehypertension”; a subsample of patients with measured blood pressure (BP) in the prehypertension range was asked the same question.

Results: Of 1008 non-hypertensive patients, 1.9% indicated being told they had prehypertension. Among a subsample of 102 patients with measured BP in the prehypertension range, 2.0% indicated being told they had prehypertension.

Conclusion: Few patients who probably have prehypertension are being told about it by clinicians. (J Am Board Fam Med 2011;24:117–118.)

Keywords: Patient-Provider Communication, Prehypertension

Prehypertension is extremely common. In primary care clinics, as many as 40% of adults who do not have hypertension have prehypertension.1 We recently reported that there appeared to be neither harmful nor helpful effects of labeling patients as prehypertensive.2 Whether clinicians are actually using the term “prehypertension” with patients has not been specifically examined to our knowledge, although our recent paper suggests that very few patients with prehyperten-

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Results
Of 1754 patients completing the survey (overall response rate 63.9%), 42.5% indicated a history of hypertension. Among those not indicating a history of hypertension (n = 1008), 4.3% indicated being told of borderline hypertension, and 1.9% indicated being told of prehypertension (Table 1). Less than 1% indicated both. Of a subsample of 182 patients without known hypertension who had BP measured as part of this study, 102 had BP in the prehypertension range. Among this group, 2.0% of patients indicated being told they have prehypertension and 3.9% indicated being told that their BP was borderline (Table 1).

Comments
Few patients who probably have prehypertension recall being told about it. It is possible that patients were told about prehypertension and just do not recall it, but we think it more likely that clinicians do not use this term with patients. The term “borderline” might be preferred by clinicians, but we found that recollection of being told about borderline hypertension was only slightly more common. One possible explanation for not engaging patients in a discussion about prehypertension is that clinicians do not find it useful in practice. It is possible that clinicians counsel patients about lifestyle modifications that will reduce their chances of developing hypertension without telling them specifically about prehypertension.

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References

Table 1. Percentage of Nonhypertensive Adult Patients Reporting being Told about Prehypertension or Borderline Hypertension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Nonhypertensive Adults in the Sample (n = 1008)</th>
<th>Nonhypertensive Adults with Measured BP in the Prehypertension Range (n = 102)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prehypertension</td>
<td>1.9 (1.0–2.7)</td>
<td>2.0 (−0.8–4.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borderline hypertension</td>
<td>4.3 (3.0–5.5)</td>
<td>3.9 (1.0–7.8)</td>
</tr>
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Values provided as % (95% CI). BP, blood pressure.