There's an App for That: A Case Study on the Impact of Spaced Education on Ordering CT Examinations

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DESCRIPTION OF THE PROBLEM

CT examinations constitute a major source of medical radiation exposure in the United States [1]. The number of CT examinations performed in the United States increased from 3 million to 80 million between 1980 and 2010 [2]. The growth of radiologic imaging has outpaced other components of health care spending. Appropriate utilization of imaging is important not only to prevent unnecessary cost, but also to ensure patient safety [3,4]. Incorrectly or inappropriately ordered radiologic examinations may result in an increased radiation dose, unnecessary exposure to intravenous contrast administration, or an inferior examination that would have benefited from contrast administration when none was requested. The patient may experience a delay or cancellation at the time of his or her radiology appointment to clarify or correct an inappropriately requested examination or may need to return for further imaging.

Appropriate utilization and accurate ordering of radiology examinations remain a challenge for many health care organizations. Although the ACR Appropriateness Criteria guidelines are widely available, the rate of incorporation into clinical practice remains low [5,6]. In recent years, national campaigns, such as Choosing Wisely, have focused on high-quality care, cost-effective health care delivery, and patient safety to avoid wasteful or unnecessary medical tests, procedures, and imaging studies [7]. However, targeted educational and practice improvement strategies emphasizing appropriate ordering of CT examinations are needed, along with studies demonstrating the impact of these strategies on appropriate imaging practice.

It has been proposed that workplace-based learning will be essential to health care education in the future, allowing participants to acquire knowledge on their own time and in an efficient manner conducive to busy clinical schedules [8]. However, incorporating interdisciplinary and interprofessional learning in the midst of busy clinical practice remains challenging. A number of randomized trials have demonstrated that asynchronous "spaced education" paired with repeated testing can increase knowledge acquisition and retention [9-11]. The core principles of spacing and testing imply that a learner is presented with educational content at spaced intervals (eg, daily or weekly), and testing provides the means to "activate" the learning via the delivery of a question followed by education on the topic after a learner answers the question[12,13]. Several studies with practitioners, patients, and trainees have shown benefit to this approach, with this method of learning being well accepted and associated with enhanced participation and demonstrating an impact on physician behavior [14-16].

We hypothesized that utilizing spaced education by delivering questions to the learner via a web-based smartphone application (webapp) will increase the appropriate and accurate ordering of outpatient urologic CT examinations, as measured by greater adherence to published guidelines.

WHAT WAS DONE

Participants and Test Methods

Ethical approval was granted by Vanderbilt University Medical Center institutional review board (IRB) before commencement of this prospective study (blinded author's institution). This pilot study was conducted at a large, single urban academic medical center. Beginning 3 months before the intervention

and continuing throughout the study, all outpatient CT examinations ordered by Vanderbilt University Medical Center's Department of Urology were reviewed and categorized as appropriately ordered or flagged for re-protocoling by a lead CT technologist based on a protocol algorithm developed from national guidelines including the ACR Appropriateness Criteria. Subsequently, an attending radiologist reviewed the flagged examinations and determined the protocol based on a review of the patient's clinical history. The ordering provider was contacted to clarify the order as needed on a caseby-case basis after the electronic medical record and other available information were reviewed.

Baseline measurements, which included the number and most frequent types of re-protocoled outpatient CT examinations during a 3-month time frame, were identified, analyzed, and indexed against the total number of CT examinations ordered during the same time frame (re-protocoled = 104, total ordered =303). These data served as a needs assessment and were utilized to identify the top clinical indications that resulted in an incorrect CT order. The incorrect orders mostly related to contrast orders (with and without contrast versus with contrast). Representative examples include (1) ordering a CT of the chest, abdomen, and pelvis with and without intravenous contrast to assess for metastatic prostate or testicular carcinoma when a CT with contrast is sufficient and (2) ordering a CT of the abdomen with intravenous contrast to evaluate for renal cell carcinoma recurrence post-ablation when a CT with and without contrast is appropriate to assess for enhancement at the ablation site. Using the needs assessment and the ACR Appropriateness Criteria, 36 case-based multiple-choice questions for the spaced education learning activity were then developed by a fellowship-trained abdominal imaging radiologist. These questions were

subsequently edited independently by two abdominal imaging radiologists and a urologist.

Before the educational intervention, a subspecialty radiologist in the abdominal imaging section at our institution delivered a 15-min introductory presentation on this project at the Department of Urology grand rounds. Participants attending the grand rounds included faculty members, residents, and advanced practice providers from the Department of Urology.

Urology outpatient CT examinations are typically ordered by urology nonphysician providers and urologists. A total of 28 urologists and nonphysician providers were enrolled as participants in the study. Residents were not included as study participants due to the described outpatient CT ordering workflow. Study participants were then placed into the automated system for receiving daily case-based questions via e-mail or text message through an institutional



Fig 1. Mobile interface of a sample image-based question with answer choices and the correct answer highlighted and a detailed explanation of correct and incorrect answer choices, as well as a reference for further education.



webapp. The mode of delivery, email versus text message, was determined by individual participant preference. The 36 multiple-choice questions were delivered daily, Monday through Thursday, over a period 3-month (October to December). However, questions were not delivered on holidays or the days before or after holidays, to respect the wish of our participants to be questionfree on these days. Participants' responses to the multiple-choice questions remained anonymous. Immediately after submitting an answer to a question, participants received feedback consisting of a detailed explanation of the correct answer as well as an explanation of each incorrect option. The explanations also referenced the ACR Appropriateness Criteria and included a link to the specific ACR Appropriateness Criteria for continued learning (Fig. 1). Each question expired after 24 hours. If a question was not answered, identical feedback information was provided to study participants after expiration of the question.

Intervention and Postintervention Data Collection

The following four sets of data were collected (Fig. 2):

1. Number of re-protocoled orders indexed against the total number

of orders during the 3 months before the intervention

- 2. Number of re-protocoled orders indexed against the total number of orders during the 3-month intervention
- 3. Number of re-protocoled orders indexed against the total number of orders during the first 3 months after the intervention (postintervention phase 1)
- 4. Number of re-protocoled orders indexed against the total number of orders during the next 3 months after the intervention (postintervention phase 2)

Statistical Analysis

The percentage change of reprotocoled orders for CT before the intervention, during the intervention, and during both postintervention phases were compared using a oneway analysis of variance test. To then identify specific time periods during which the rates of reprotocoled orders CTs were different, a Tukey's range test with Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons was performed.

OUTCOMES

A total of 28 urologists and nonphysician providers from the urology department participated in the study. Of the 28 study participants, 20 (71.4%) engaged in the asynchronous webapp case-based questions. Engagement was voluntary. However, all 28 participants received the questions, answers, rationale for answers, and links to references. Thus, there was an opportunity for learning for all participants.

The total number of CT examinations ordered and the number and percent requiring re-protocoling are shown in Table 1. Before the

 Table 1. CT examinations requested by the urology department and number of CT

 examinations requiring re-protocoling by the abdominal radiology section

	Pre-	During	Post-	
	Intervention	Intervention	Intervention	Post-
	(July to	(October to	January to	Intervention
	September	December	March	(April to
Data Type	2016)	2016)	2017)	June 2017)
Total no. of urologic CT orders	303	271	414	382
No. of orders re- protocoled	104	80	100	76
% orders re- protocoled	34.3	29.5	24.2	19.9

intervention, 34.3% of CT examiordered required nations reprotocoling by a radiology attending physician. During the educational intervention period, this number decreased to 29.5% and further dropped in both postintervention phases to 24.2% in postintervention phase 1 and 19.9% in postintervention phase 2 (Fig. 3). The one-way analysis of variance test resulted in a P value of .0001, indicating that one or more of the rates were significantly different. Tukey's range test with Bonferroni adjustment revealed that the reductions in re-protocoled CTs were statistically different comparing the baseline group with the postintervention phase 1 group (P = .012) as well as when compared with postintervention phase 2 group (P < .01). The rate of change was also statistically lower in the postintervention phase 2 group compared with the rate during the intervention (P = .03).

Incorrect ordering of CT examinations constitutes a multifaceted issue for many academic radiology

departments. Not only do incorrectly ordered examinations place patients at risk for exposure to higher radiation doses, insertion of an intravenous catheter, and contrast administration, the incorrectly ordered examination may not accurately assess the clinical question of the ordering provider. Accordingly, we examined whether asynchronous spaced education with case-based questions could increase the number of appropriately ordered CT examinations in a single department at an academic medical center. This pilot study demonstrated that a 3-month intervention led to a significant reduction in incorrect CT orders requiring re-protocoling by the radiology department and thus represented a change in ordering behaviors.

The present study has some limitations. First, we present a relatively small sample size of participants without a control group because of the focus on one clinical department. These pilot data are an important first step in this quality improvement process and will guide future multidepartmental studies to assess the scope of the problem on the institutional level. Second, our study is from a single institution, and although our institutional protocols follow the ACR Appropriateness Criteria, there is variation in CT ordering protocols across institutions. Therefore, our results may not be generalizable to other centers. A multi-institutional study could be performed to better address this in the future. Third, we were not able to assess overall impact on radiation dose to patients, contrast dose, or scanner time. Alterations in the radiation dose between the original ordered study and performed study were not assessed because of multiple variabilities affecting accurate measurement. Similarly, contrast dosages were tailored to the individual patient based on renal glomerular filtration rate, and therefore these variables were not assessed. Lastly, it is possible there were confounding factors influencing ordering patterns that we were not aware of; however, such potential confounders hospital-wide educational programs and departmental initiatives on



Fig 3. Change in percentage of CT scans requiring re-protocoling during the period of the study. Statistically significant differences were found when comparing the baseline group with the post-intervention phase 1 group, the baseline group with the post-intervention phase 2 group, and the intervention group with the post-intervention phase 2 group.

ordering urological CT scans would typically come from our radiology department, and thus, we would expect to be aware of such programs and initiatives. We are not aware of any such programs at our institution during the study period.

In summary, we found that asynchronous spaced interval education, specifically on the ordering of outpatient CT examinations by the urology department, improves the number of appropriately and accurately ordered examinations. This method of education is valuable and can be incorporated into clinical training, continuing medical education, and quality improvement projects.

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This work was supported in part by the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine Faculty Fellowship to Advance Medical Education grant. The funding source was not involved in the study design; collection, analysis, and interpretation of data; writing of the report; or decision to submit the article for publication. The authors state that they have no conflict of interest related to the material discussed in this article.

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