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In Quality of Life Questionnaires, What do Patients Understand “Past Month” to Mean?

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Introduction and Objective

As part of the cross-cultural language adaptation process, in-depth cognitive debriefing interviews are performed with a small group of patients who have characteristics similar to the intended population that will be using the newly translated measure. During these interviews, the participants are asked to describe in detail their understanding of the underlying concept for each item and response option.

Methods

Data from 96 separate cognitive interviews across 11 different languages have shown that not all patients derive the same understanding from the commonly used time-reference “in the Past Month.”

While the recall time-period being referred to here seems to be clear at face value, specific inquiry during the evaluation of patient-cognition showed that respondents differed in their perceptions and understanding.

To explore this issue, we recorded the various concepts patients reported during debriefing interviews across a wide variety of measures and languages.

Table 1: Distribution of Languages and Patient Characteristics

Language	Number tested	Female	Male	Mean age	Pathology
Australian English	5	5	0	49.2	Obesity
Canadian French	10	1 ^a	4 ^a	40.6 ^a	Obesity (5) GEND (5)
Croatian	10	7	3	30.4	Epilepsy
Czech	10	5	5	42.3	Epilepsy
Dutch	5	5	0	29.6	Dermatology
French	5	5	0	29.2	Dermatology
German	5	5	0	29.4	Dermatology
Slovak	5	3	2	32	Epilepsy
UK English	5	5	0	26.4	Dermatology
US English	10	6	4	57.7	Hypertension (5) Incontinence (5)
US Spanish	26	15	11	35	Male Pattern Baldness (6) Obesity (7) Dermatology (6) Incontinence (7)

^a Gender and age data only collected on 5 patients.

Results

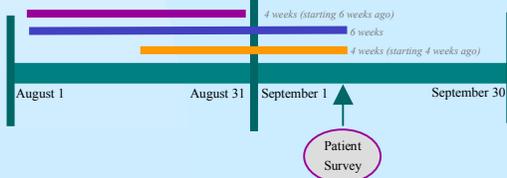
Interviews showed that if a patient is asked to respond in the middle of the month (for example– on September 15th), only 64% of the respondents correctly understood “past month” to refer to the period of time between September 15th back to August 15th.

An additional 25% understood this to mean the most recent complete one-month period of August (providing a different four week recall period). The remaining 7% understood it to mean either the previous two weeks (back to September 1st) or the previous six weeks (back to August 1st).

Each patient was then shown two alternative time-references: “in the past 30 days” and “in the past 4 weeks.” In responding to which alternative they would suggest and why, all patients accurately understood both of the alternatives to mean September 15th to August 15th.

Table 2:
Varied Understandings of “Past Month”

What does the patient understand “the past month” to mean?			
October 15 th back to October 1 st (two weeks)	October 15 th back to September 15 th (four weeks)	The whole prior month of September only (a different four week period)	October 15 th back to September 1 st (six weeks)
3 (3.13% of total)	64 (66.67% of total)	25 (26.04% of total)	4 (4.17% of total)



Of these two alternatives, the “past 4 weeks” was preferred by 61% of the interview participants. Common reasons cited were:

- It is easier to visualize 4 weeks than 30 days (no need to calculate the days)
- It is difficult to think about 30 days which all contained separate experiences, whereas when one thinks of 4 weeks, one thinks of the entire time as a whole
- It better reflects common language
- People remember things in terms of weeks, rather than days; especially when it is such a long period of time

Table 3:
Preferred Phrasing of Recall Periods

Which does the patient prefer?	
IN THE PAST 30 DAYS...	IN THE PAST FOUR WEEKS...
28 (28.17% of total)	61 (63.54% of total)

Summary

When anchoring the recall period on self-report measures to the prior month, it is suggested that the phrase “in the past 4 weeks” will provide the greatest clarity to the patient and the greatest accuracy for the data, particularly for studies in multi-national settings.