

## Little empathy for side effect fears

By **Steven Niles** [steven.niles@cancom.com](mailto:steven.niles@cancom.com)

**Generalized fears** about taking medications are common among patients, according to a new study issued by **Verilogue** exploring the actual fears and concerns patients most frequently discuss in their doctors' offices and how doctors respond to them. The review of 23,923 naturally occurring patient-doctor interactions across 14 specialties during the course of 18 months found that one of every four physician office visits includes a discussion about a patient fear.

Fear conversations arose around three main themes: diseases/illnesses, medicine side effects, and life/social concerns. Fear discussions were most likely to occur in psychiatric, cardiologist, and neurologist visits and least likely to occur in allergist and dermatologist visits.

Although the number of conversations around disease/illness and life/social fears fluctuated across therapeutic categories, the level of concerns expressed about medicine side effects remained constant, accounting for about 20% of all fears expressed by patients during visits with primary care physicians and/or psychiatrists.

Verilogue disclosed the following verbatims exemplifying the ways in which patients expressed their generalized fears about taking medications: "I'm scared to take something. Everything has a side effect," and, "I'm so scared. I'm allergic to so many medications."

Primary care physicians tend to be less responsive to and empathetic with patient fears, likely due to the time demands of their practices on average. Verilogue's ([verilogue.com](http://verilogue.com)) data and analy-

sis revealed not only a varying degree of discussion of fears driven by the patient, but also a swing in the type of response these concerns generated from physicians. The most common response was to simply acknowledge the fear statement with a quick "Okay," or "I know," and move on without ever directly confronting the fear or asking for elaboration. Data showed extremely limited examples in which a primary care physician directly engaged a patient's fear. In most cases, it was common practice for primary care physicians to not address patients' concerns, even when fears such as "I'm so scared" were repeated.

On the other hand, psychiatrists, which represented the largest category of fear-based discussions, commonly showed empathy toward patient fears, even though they didn't necessarily ask for elaboration from the patient regarding that fear.

