

# Public perceptions of thyroid cancer overdiagnosis and overtreatment information and communication strategies

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## BACKGROUND

Low risk thyroid cancer is widely recognised as an overdiagnosed, and subsequently overtreated condition. Changing the terminology of this condition to exclude the word ‘cancer’ has now been recommended by several international expert groups in order to help alleviate patient anxiety and encourage conservative treatment where appropriate.

## OBJECTIVES

To investigate public perceptions of information about the nature and impact of overdiagnosis and overtreatment in low risk thyroid cancer, and explore thoughts regarding the proposed strategy to change the terminology of low risk thyroid cancer.

## METHODS

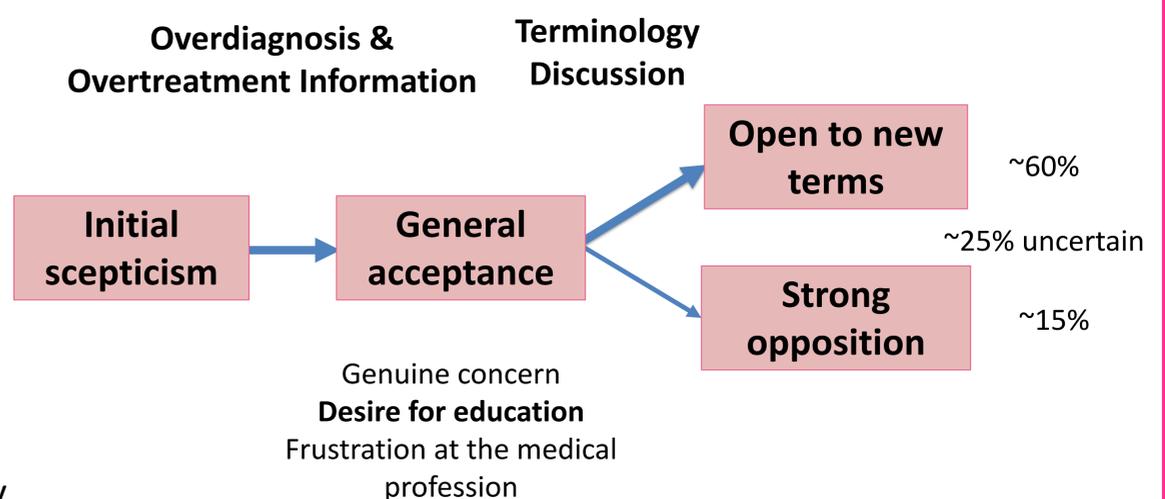
We conducted a qualitative study using focus groups that included a presentation explaining thyroid cancer, overdiagnosis and overtreatment, and proposed communication strategies. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

## RESULTS

47 men (n=21) and women (n=26) of various ages from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds participated in six focus groups.

Responses to the information presented and questions proposed to participants followed a similar pattern and were consistent across the focus groups (see Figure 1). There was a level of initial scepticism and disagreement within the groups, however all participants supported further information and public/patient education about overdiagnosis and overtreatment. Overall, participants were divided over the strategy to change the terminology (see Table 1).

**Figure 1. Participant responses to focus group information and discussion**



**Table 1. Views and opinions about strategy of changing the terminology**

Reasons for changing the terminology	
<b>Psychological impact of ‘cancer’</b>	<i>“Once you hear the Big C you can’t hear anything else.”</i> <i>“Cancer automatically, for the majority of people, equals death.”</i>
<b>‘Cancer’ doesn’t accurately reflect nature of the condition</b>	<i>“It’s low risk, it’s not really the same cancer that we are used to.”</i>
Reasons against changing the terminology	
<b>It is still cancer with an inherent risk</b>	<i>“There is still a risk [of progression]. Even if it is a small one.”</i>
<b>Masking the truth</b>	<i>“It’s still cancer. And I’d want to know, I’d want to know the truth.”</i>
<b>New term would be eventually revealed (e.g. by Google)</b>	<i>“Dr Google would probably lead me to cancer anyway.”</i>
<b>‘Cancer’ encourages appropriate attitude to management</b>	<i>“Cancer makes you think seriously about going to get checks.”</i>

## DISCUSSION

Similar to the medical community, the public is unsure about whether changing the terminology of low risk thyroid cancer (and other low risk conditions) is an adequate strategy to help reduce overdiagnosis and overtreatment. However, there is an overall strong desire for greater public and patient education surrounding these topics.

## IMPLICATIONS

Findings suggest that thyroid cancer overdiagnosis and overtreatment information should be included alongside public health campaigns and provided to patients when discussing treatment options.