

Facilitating or getting in the way? The effect of clinicians' knowledge, values and beliefs on referral and participation

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Total word count: 7177 words.

ABSTRACT

Background: Despite the compelling evidence of the benefits of cardiac rehabilitation (CR) on risk factor modification, quality of life and mortality reduction, a significant proportion of eligible patients are not referred or do not participate. Factors influencing CR referral and participation are complex and are likely patient, referral system and clinician related. Little is known about clinician-related factors, which include attitudes, values and beliefs towards CR, or how these factors affect patient referral and attendance. This review examines the current evidence in the literature, in relation to clinicians' attitudes, values and beliefs about CR.

Methods: A review of the literature was conducted on studies in relation to clinicians' attitudes, values and beliefs toward CR. An expert consensus methodology was used to develop the concepts presented in this paper.

Results: Besides guidelines, a range of other factors influences clinicians' view about CR. This review suggests that clinicians lacking cardiac qualifications may have limited knowledge and awareness of CR and its benefits. A low agreement among clinicians on who is more likely to benefit from CR was also identified. Clinicians' personal lifestyle and health belief, the availability and quality of local CR program, and the lack of standard administrative process of referral can also hinder the referral of patients to CR.

Conclusions: Clinician-related factors are important to consider in relation to CR referral and participation. Education to clinicians, discussion of local services and the support of an efficacious system at the program and organisation levels are essential.

Word count: 245 words

Keywords: Cardiac Rehabilitation, Secondary Prevention, Clinician Attitudes, Referral, Recruitment, Participation Barriers

Background

Globally, cardiac rehabilitation (CR) is the recommended standard of care for people recovering from a cardiac event.¹ CR is an effective intervention for risk factor modification, improving quality of life, and reducing mortality.^{2,3} International guidelines recommend that all patients with cardiovascular disease, coronary heart disease, heart failure, arrhythmias, congenital heart disease and valvular heart disease should be referred to CR as an integral component of care. Further, CR should be offered irrespective of age, sex, ethnicity and clinical condition.^{1,4}

Despite robust evidence of benefit, endorsement in national and international recommendations,⁵⁻¹² and decades of effort to improve patients' participation, CR is still underutilised internationally.¹³ Poor referral rates contribute to the problem by limiting access and informed choice. Across Europe, less than half of the eligible patients are referred to CR¹⁴ or participate.¹⁵ This pattern is repeated in the USA, with participation rates of 25–31% for men and 11–20% for women^{16,17} and in Australia, where CR utilisation is 10-30%.^{18,19}

The factors that may influence referral, uptake and participation in CR are multiple, complex and inter-related.^{13, 20, 21} Factors related to patients, clinicians and health systems are all important. Some factors affecting participation have received considerable attention, such as patient-related¹⁶⁻¹⁹ and referral system-related factors²⁰⁻²¹. Whereas other health-care provider factors (both clinician and non-clinician) have had limited synthesis of the evidence, particularly the role that clinicians take in implementing policy through screening and recruitment processes.

Positive clinician perceptions of CR have been shown to be beneficial for subsequent CR referral.²² The personal knowledge the clinician has of CR and the administrative process of referral, can influence the way that the clinician views CR, including whether they consider

patients as appropriate candidates for referral. Of greater concern, these perceptions may impact on the timing, strength and persistence in achieving referral and encouragement to attend by the clinician. Furthermore, while policy may specify who should be referred to CR, local availability of resources, including exercise equipment, space for exercise, education sessions and sufficient staffing for screening, promotion and assessment, may influence prioritising of patients for referral.²³ This may manifest in an explicit policy about CR referral, or such understanding may be implicit. Likely influencers of implicit understanding may include clinician's values related to who will benefit from CR or who will 'fit' the program available., the purpose of this review is to synthesise the literature in relation to clinician attitudes, values and beliefs and their effect on CR referral and participation.

Methods

An expert consensus methodology using the nominal group process was used to develop the concepts presented in this paper.^{24, 25} Consensus methods are being used increasingly to solve problems in medicine and health. The main purpose of these methods is to define levels of agreement on controversial subjects. Advocates suggest that, when properly employed, consensus strategies can create structured environments in which experts are given the best available information, allowing their solutions to problems to be more justifiable and credible than otherwise.

The "nominal group" for this consensus meeting comprised expert national and international CR leaders, researchers and clinicians, with opinions elicited during a workshop to examine the evidence. To underpin the views of the nominal group a structured review of the literature was conducted on studies in relation to health professionals' knowledge, values and beliefs about cardiac rehabilitation. The electronic databases Medline, Cumulative Index of Nursing and Allied Health (CINAHL), Science Direct databases and the World Wide Web using the Google search engine were used. Reference lists of retrieved articles were hand searched for

additional references. The key words included were “cardiac rehabilitation”; “physician or clinician”; “referral”, “access to care”, and “barrier”. Publications relevant only to patient-related factors or having samples only of non-clinician providers such as health psychologists and sports scientists were excluded from this review.

Results

The key words search yielded a total of 148 publications from 1995-2015. After de-duplication, 98 publications were then screened for this review. The clinicians described in the studies were diverse and included both health care providers who had cardiac qualifications (cardiologists, cardiac surgeons, cardiac nurse specialists) as well as those who did not (physicians, family doctors, practice nurses, nurses, physiotherapists, allied health). No study that directly explored clinician’s knowledge, values and/or beliefs about CR were identified. The relevant literature on clinician-related factors to CR referral and participation were reviewed. A summary of the key findings from the literature was drafted and refined iteratively. Emerging issues were organised thematically and are presented here. Four key themes emerged; clinicians’ knowledge, values, beliefs about CR, and the subsequent effect on CR referral and participation (Figure 1).

Clinicians’ knowledge

Clinicians’ knowledge of the benefits of CR is key to ensuring promotion of CR to patients. Importantly, knowledge of local eligibility criteria and access pathways to CR programs increases participation. Whereas lack of knowledge and/or experience with CR has been shown to adversely affect physician’s judgements on who should be attending, and who is likely to benefit from CR.²⁶ Primary care physicians are less likely to refer their eligible patients to CR compared to cardiologists and cardiac surgeons, perhaps due to lack of familiarity with the CR program, and because they perceive more barriers to participation. Some of the barriers are administrative, for example, non-standardised CR referral forms,

and unfamiliarity of local CR sites.²⁷ Completion of formal cardiac qualifications may not be as necessary as being engaged in training and cardiac care, as cardiology residents demonstrate a high referral rate compared to their general medical counterparts (67% vs 4.6%) (Table 1).¹⁹ Cardiology residents, fellows and cardiologists also had better knowledge scores about CR programs and eligibility criteria and were more familiar with CR referral guidelines.²⁸ Similarly, cardiologists, cardiac surgeons and cardiac interns exhibit high levels of knowledge of the benefits of CR,²³ but their referral rates were still moderate at 65.9±32.0% of eligible patients (Table 1). Clearly other factors may be influential. In this case, the reasons for non-referral were diverse and included: (1) patients' refusal; (2) distance; (3) patients resided in a long-term care facility; (4) unable to ambulate; (5) dementia or cognitive impairment; (6) complex health issues and/or palliative; (7) lack of transportation; (8) return to work, (9) psychiatric co-morbidities; and (10) language barriers.²³ While, these results should be interpreted with caution due to the low response rate, it is clear that an interplay of factors is occurring.²³

Clinicians' Values

Clinicians' values and preferences greatly influence patient behaviour. Engagement in CR will not occur when clinicians do not value the benefits of CR or have personal reasons for not recommending lifestyle modification.²¹ In order to deliver a persuasive and specific recommendation irrespective of the patient's condition, the clinician must personally value lifestyle modification and have conviction in the benefit of CR, not just in general, but as delivered in a format tailored to the individual. Clinician experience appears to influence values regarding CR. Physicians with fewer years of experience appeared to be less likely to refer patients with musculoskeletal pain to CR, due to the perception that those patients will derive a lesser benefit from the program.²⁹ Paradoxically, clinicians may comply with policy while not having a fundamental belief that CR is effective. In a multi-center, cross-sectional

survey study conducted in Turkey among physicians, nurses, physiotherapists, and other allied health professionals (n=727), 68% of the clinicians believed CR is mandatory. Also 70% of cardiovascular surgeons, thoracic physicians, and general physicians and rehabilitation physicians regularly notified their patients about and referred their patients to CR programs (Table 1).³⁰ However, only 24% perceived CR was beneficial for the management of cardiopulmonary disease. A small minority (8.1%) thought cardiopulmonary rehabilitation was unnecessary or were not aware of it.³⁰ No CR participation rate was provided, which would have helped determine if clinician beliefs ultimately influence persuasion characteristics.

Individual attitudes of the clinicians regarding the benefits of CR are likely to be influenced by their own health values and individual lifestyle choices. Physicians can be influential role models for their patients and '*practicing what we preach*' can be an effective and efficient strategy to promote healthy behaviour to patients.³¹ However, if the clinician has poor lifestyle behaviours, the level of importance they place on encouraging patients to make a change may be lower.³²⁻³⁴ For example, it has been shown that family doctors were eight times more likely to place low importance on alcohol screening and counselling if they consumed more than three drinks per day relative to abstinence,³³ conversely, they were 3.38 times more likely to promote physical activity if they were physically active.³⁵ Having poor lifestyle behaviours may also decrease the confidence of clinicians to suggest lifestyle modification to patients, for example discussing losing weight with patients if they felt they too were overweight.³⁶ Further decreasing the likelihood of clinicians who are overweight initiating these discussions, it has been shown that people mistrust physicians who are overweight. Indeed, people generally distrust clinicians who are visibly not following their own advice, and this bias is not dependent on the patients' own weight.³⁷

Practice nurses with healthy lifestyle behaviours have been shown to view lifestyle changes as more achievable; those with lower body mass index view obesity as more preventable,³⁸ those who have quit smoking successfully are more likely to encourage others to quit '*if I can do it [quit smoking], you can do it too*'.³²

Clinicians' beliefs

Clinicians' beliefs about individual's suitability for CR influences their referral and subsequent attendance. This review has revealed that referral is inconsistent and limited, with selection preference evident for specific diagnoses, socio-demographic and motivation characteristics.^{29, 39} Higher referral rates were seen among patients with a diagnosis of myocardial infarction, coronary artery bypass graft surgery or unstable angina,^{29, 39} whereas patients with a diagnoses of heart failure and atrial fibrillation were less likely to be referred, despite the presence of multiple risk factors.^{29, 39, 40}

It is possible that clinicians are 'filtering out' patients on the basis of other criteria, including whether they believe candidates would benefit from or suit the type of program offered. Socio-demographic characteristics such as being married, being younger, having English as the primary language and private insurance increased the chance of referral.³² Being female (39.6% versus 49.4% for men),⁴¹ and having a lower socioeconomic status (SES) (61.4% for lower SES versus 68.1% for higher SES, $p < 0.01$)⁴² decreased this possibility (Table 1).^{17, 41, 43-45} Support for the concept that the low referral rate of female patients is due to clinician belief was found in a study of physicians' judgments of the suitability of patients for CR. This study found that female patients were considered less likely to benefit from CR than males.²⁹ Similarly, motivation characteristics such as the clinician's belief that an individual patient's motivation to exercise is low have also been identified as limiting CR referral.^{27, 29, 46, 47} For

example, obese patients were often believed to have very limited motivation to exercise, and were less likely to be referred to exercise-based CR.²⁷ This belief could result from the significant association between obesity, diabetes and dropout in CR programs in previous studies.^{48, 49}

Clinicians' beliefs regarding who would benefit from CR programs affect their recommendation of CR to their patients and patients perceive this. Patients who were female, those older than 65 years of age, low income, less education, and retired reported a lower perceived recommendation to participate in CR from their clinician.⁵⁰ This finding is not unique to CR, research into other conditions requiring lifestyle change and health providers' beliefs indicates that if eligible candidates are obese, negative attitudes by the clinician towards obese patients may prevail, including viewing them as awkward, unattractive, ugly and non-compliant therefore limiting referral.⁵¹ Similarly, the ability to speak English and cultural background will substantially influence the quality of the doctor-patient relationship.⁵² Minority patients are less likely to establish rapport with physicians, receive sufficient information, and be encouraged to participate in their treatment decision making.⁵²

While there is a high level of agreement among physicians about patient's motivation and their likelihood to benefit from CR, a recent study of 51 Canadian physicians and cardiologists, showed a low agreement on other 'cues' among physicians.²⁹ For example, 42% of the participating physicians believed that bypass patients are less likely to benefit than patients who had undergone percutaneous coronary intervention, while 47% believed the opposite. Most importantly, many of the participating physicians were unaware of the judgements they used when deciding which patient should be referred to cardiac rehabilitation.²⁹

The effect of knowledge, values and beliefs on CR referral

Clinicians may influence participation through the clarity and emphasis used in their referral, as only approximately 50% of referred patients subsequently participate in a CR program.²⁶ The strength of the physician's recommendation is one of the most consistent and strongest predictors of CR referral and enrolment.^{17, 53, 54} A study of 1156 inpatients from 11 hospitals across Ontario showed that patients' perceived strength of healthcare provider endorsement of CR was 3.75 ± 1.15 (on a 5 point Likert scale). Higher perceived strength of the recommendation was associated with higher chance of enrolment in CR (OR = 2.07) and better attendance, particularly from medical clinicians as compared to nurses.⁵⁰ Patients who are told by their physician that CR is not necessary or not suitable for them are much less likely to attend than those whose physicians tell them that CR is valuable and of benefit.

During a relatively short hospital stay, information on CR may be missed⁵⁵. For instance in a study of 179 myocardial infarction patients at least 1 in 6 did not know what CR involves before hospital discharge.⁵⁶ Thus, the involvement of a cardiologist before discharge is important and has been associated with improved CR referral and enrolment.^{54, 57}

It is likely that a strong recommendation by physicians and a sound understanding of CR benefits by patients enables the patient to have a more proactive attitude toward their illness. These illness perceptions include their beliefs regarding how and whether the illness could be treated and managed; the expected outcome of the illness and most importantly, the cause of the illness.⁵⁸ In this situation, when the messages provided by clinicians regarding CR are reported to be inconsistent, patients are much less likely to change their illness perceptions.

20

A further barrier to CR referral and patient engagement may be the inconsistent messages that are rife in cardiac care. For example a cardiologist specialising in percutaneous coronary interventions may tell patients they have "fixed" their artery at the same time as the cardiac nurse specialist advises lifestyle modification to prevent recurrence. When a patient is told by

their physician that they are not “bad” enough to need the CR program,²⁰ or that they are ‘fixed’ it is likely that they will assume that they can manage the problem on their own and participation in CR is not necessary.

Clinician’s attitudes, values and beliefs towards CR have not been directly studied for their effects on patients’ CR attendance. The referral and facilitation of patients entering CR is dependent on the availability of CR resources, administrative structure and available personnel.⁵⁹ A survey of a group of family doctors and cardiologists suggested clinicians may not be sceptical toward the benefits of CR, but rather the quality of their local program.²⁷ Further proof that this is a major issue is that CR coordinators themselves are frustrated with their service inadequacies, such as lack of access to occupational therapies, dietetics, pharmacy services, as well as lack of dedicated funding and equipment.⁶⁰ Other problems include lack of standardized referral forms, inconvenient and poor quality programs and lack of discharge communication to CR from providers.⁵⁴ These problems have been known for some time yet there has been very little change to address the issues, including modifications that could help overcome patient related barriers to participation in CR.⁶¹⁻⁶³ The British Association of Cardiovascular Prevention and Rehabilitation conducted a survey of CR programs to determine how programs address equity and found that 66% of services (126/191) stated that they promoted CR in at least one of the under-represented groups; 46% of those stated that they promoted attendance in women, 48% in the elderly, 55% in revascularization patients, and only 34% in ethnic minority groups.⁶⁴ Our review suggested that physicians may be reluctant to refer patients from a cultural minority group to a CR program that is not enabled to provide culturally sensitive and relevant service.

Discussion

This review has synthesised the evidence on clinician-related factors, which may influence the referral to, and uptake of CR. We identified three key themes: clinician knowledge; values;

and beliefs. Together, these three interplay to promote, or inhibit referral to CR. Importantly, clinicians need to have sufficient knowledge to understand the benefits, and to be informed of local options and referral pathways. They need to value the CR service and perceive it as an important part of the continuum of care for a cardiac patient. Moreover, clinicians' personal health beliefs will underpin their recommendations for lifestyle change, with positive health seeking behaviours of the clinicians greatly enhancing the likelihood of recommending lifestyle change to patients. Finally, clinicians need to believe that CR will be of benefit to their individual patient in order to recommend participation.

The factors which contribute to clinicians' knowledge, values and beliefs about CR may be the hardest things to change, compared to system, and patient-related factors. Lack of knowledge about the benefits of CR exists not only among patients but also clinicians, and is a major contributing factor to the underutilisation of CR.⁵⁹ While diagnostic biases are common in CR referral, it is perhaps not entirely unexpected, since international CR guidelines are most clear in their recommendations for people with acute coronary syndrome and after revascularisation procedures.^{65, 66} From similar studies in diabetes management, clinicians' knowledge of diabetes management strategies may be more important than their knowledge about the disease itself, because of the effect of those strategies on patients' attitudes and their adherence to treatment regimen.⁶⁷ Diabetes clinicians who believed diabetes is harder to treat than hypertension indicated their doubt in treatment efficacy, and consequently patients' had lower adherence to prescribed therapy. Therefore we observe that a combined lack of knowledge and belief of low efficacy of treatment can negatively affect the patients' empowerment in their self-management.⁶⁸

The solution to lack of CR knowledge and expertise may seem obvious - specialised education with guided experience. However, this solution is not readily available as no specific degree for CR exists internationally and few specialised graduate programs are available. As a

consequence, clinicians undertake graduate courses that are related but not sufficient such as cardiovascular, rehabilitation or chronic disease care and online courses which may not be accredited. This is an important area needing development as appropriately trained clinicians may make a significant contribution to referral and recruitment as well as secondary prevention globally.

With the increasing demand on clinicians, the lack of knowledge in multiple areas cannot be adequately addressed by education, without the support of an efficacious system at the program and organisation levels. Particular challenges exist when people do not identify or discuss when they believe a local CR program is not meeting standards; rather they act by not referring. One of the vexing issues facing clinicians is that it is difficult to have faith in benefits and provide strong recommendations for CR programs that do not meet recommended standards. There is a lack of explicit discussion and proactive approaches to improving substandard CR services. Collection of data on key performance indicators is critical to inform and provide feedback to help meet benchmark standards. Increasing local awareness of CR, and implementing performance measures for CR has also been strongly recommended.⁵⁹ Similar challenges exist in the evidence-based practice literature. Change agents and clinical champions are needed to challenge entrenched attitudes and beliefs about CR and to reduce the significant gap between what is known about CR and what is commonly practiced among clinicians.

Improving CR referral, enrolment and participation has gained a considerable amount of attention in recent years, and many different strategies have been evaluated for improving CR utilisation. Automatic referral is one such strategy, which has been implemented in the United States, Great Britain and in Australia to improve referral rate.⁶⁹⁻⁷¹ Automatic referral, within the electronic medical records system, uses an established link to automatically identify and prompt referral to CR for patients who meet the set eligible criteria. This automatic referral

process can also be done manually without the involvement of electronic medical records.⁷² The current literature on automatic referral systems has shown increased referral rate for both electronic and manual automatic referral systems.⁷³ The rates for CR referral for 'standard' strategies range from 17% to 45%, and between 38% to 45% for automatic referral systems.⁷³ Initiation of CR referral by clinicians as part of a comprehensive discharge order is the most commonly used strategy among 71 CR specialists in a Canadian study.²³ Providing CR information to patient at the bedside by allied health clinicians is the second most commonly used strategy.²³ Besides the liaison type of referral strategy (discussion about CR with an allied health clinician and the patient), an automatic referral system has shown the potential to increase CR referral.

However, a complex interplay of factors is at work. Automatic referral systems may increase the referral rate, yet, being referred does not always equate to attendance and completion of the program. Most studies in the current literature of automatic referral focused on the referral and enrolment rate but not the subsequent participation and/or completion rate, so outcomes are not as certain as could be expected. For instance, one Canadian study of 5256 patients who underwent CABG, had improved referrals to CR from an automatic referral system, but a significantly lower attendance rate compared to before the system was in operation (48.2% pre vs 65.7% post).⁷⁴ This is perhaps not surprising, since it is estimated that half of patients eligible for CR may attribute their illness to non-modifiable factors and factors that are out of their control (such as heredity or a belief that heart attack is unpredictable), so there is little motivation for behaviour change much less CR participation.⁵⁵ Overall, automatic referral systems alone may not be the panacea we expect to increase participation in CR. Indeed, interpersonal contact has a profound impact on subsequent attendance.

Although the liaison type of referral strategy is neither systematic nor is it considered as cost effective as automatic referral, it is more informative for patients. There is sufficient evidence

that suggests the strength of clinician's recommendation is the strongest predictor of CR participation, and clinician's attitudes and belief of CR is critical in the identification of eligible patients, promotion of and referral to CR programs. Unfortunately, the results of our review suggest that clinician's recommendation for CR participation to their patients varies and it is influenced by many factors, including clinician's knowledge and experience; personal health belief and lifestyle, as well as their perception of treatment efficacy.

The clinician-patient interaction is essential for patient uptake of medical advice including recommendation to participate in CR. Patients over 70 years of age are more likely than younger patients to be unquestioning of medical advice; and individuals from higher socioeconomic status are more likely to question medical advice than patients with a lower socioeconomic status.⁷⁵ Those with established disease, and people who are at risk of a poor or uncertain outcome were more unlikely to doubt medical advice.⁷⁵ When confronted with an illness, many patients believe that the clinician knows best, and these patients are more likely to rely on their clinician's opinion to make the decision to participate in CR. This review has highlighted the important influence that clinicians' own attitudes, beliefs, and values have on their patients' attitudes toward treatment and/or management options. Increased clinician awareness of CR programs, the administrative process of referral and positive attitudes among clinicians, particularly non-cardiac specialists are all essential to improve CR utilisation.

Increasing the utilisation of CR should be a combined effort of many different disciplines in the healthcare team. CR coordinators could play a valuable role in this process.⁵⁹ While a physician's recommendation is the strongest predictor of CR enrolment and attendance, in many countries, advice for CR is commonly provided by CR nursing staff. After adjusting for the strength of the physician's recommendation, CR nurse advice on CR participation resulted in a higher attendance rate compared to other clinicians or other health care providers (physiotherapist, social worker, ward nurse), family or friends, or other patients.⁷⁶ Similarly,

compared to other indicators, patients who underwent CABG perceived better endorsement of CR, and possibly due to longer length of hospital stay, more contact with clinicians, particularly the physiotherapist who often promotes physical activity.⁵⁰

Limitations

This review is limited by the data available from the included studies. While a comprehensive search strategy was applied, it is possible that the search terms did not identify all aspects of clinician related behaviour and some papers may have been missed. Furthermore, the methodology used to develop this paper was qualitative so few generalisable outcomes can be determined. However, the outcomes of this paper should underpin further research using quantitative methods to measure the impact of health professional knowledge values and beliefs on cardiac rehabilitation referral and participation. This review does not include non-clinician health providers, important contributors to the multidisciplinary CR team, which should be addressed in future research.

Conclusion

Clinicians' knowledge, values and beliefs play an important role in influencing CR participation. Although automatic referral has increased referral rates, the impact on participation is not assured, and clinicians' recommendations remain the strongest predictor of CR participation. Interventions which influence clinician knowledge, values and beliefs are required to improve CR referral pathways and to ensure all those who are recommended to receive CR are fully engaged in a suitable program.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to acknowledge the Executive Dean, Prof Paul Arbon for his commitment

to bring this international and national team of experts together for the purposes of this report.

Funding acknowledgments

The development of this paper was supported by a writers' retreat grant from the School of Nursing and Midwifery, Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, Flinders University.

Dr. Neubeck is supported by an NHMRC Early Career Fellowship (APP1036763).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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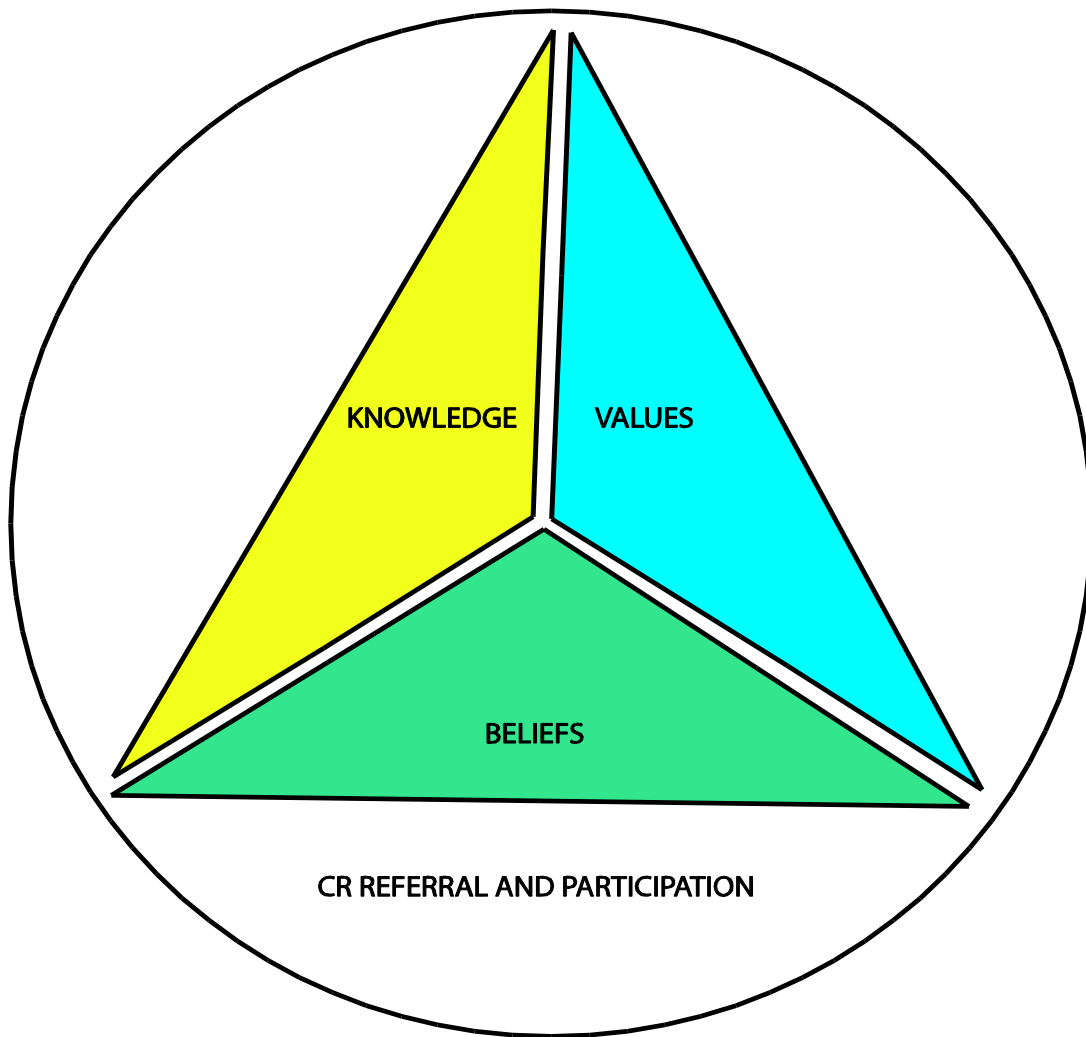


Figure 1: Knowledge, attitudes and beliefs intersect to influence CR referral and participation

Table 1. Cardiac rehabilitation referral rates for medical training, patient gender and socioeconomic status

Factor		Referral rate %
Medical training	General medicine residents	4.6 ¹⁹
	Cardiology residents	67.0 ¹⁹
	Cardiologists	65.9 ²³
	Cardiovascular surgeons and Physicians (thoracic, rehabilitation, general)	70.0 ³⁰
Patient gender	Female	39.6 ⁴¹
	Male	49.4 ⁴¹
Socioeconomic status	Low	61.4 ⁴²
	High	68.1 ⁴²