

The Importance of Wording in Guidelines Recommendations – A German Evaluation –

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Background

The successful implementation of guidelines strongly depends on its comprehensibility among their users. Therefore a standardized guidelines language is useful. Wording of German therapeutic recommendations have not been evaluated. A set of standard phrases should be established for future German guidelines.

Recommendation	Description	Symbols
soll	Strong recommendation	↑↑ A A
sollte	Recommendation	↑ B B
kann	Open recommendation	⇔ 0 C

Table 1: Different systems for linguistic and symbolic representation of guidelines recommendations; among others used by Association of the Scientific Medical Societies in Germany (AWMF) and German Disease Management Guidelines (NVL).

Methods

German S2k and S3 guidelines available at awmf.org on 10-Nov-2011 were randomized to evaluate 20 % of German valid guidelines. Their recommendations were extracted and sorted by frequency to identify commonly used terms. Limesurvey.org was used to conduct an online survey. Physicians were contacted using the mailing lists of selected professional societies (dermatology, psychiatry and general medicine).

Participants were asked for their perceived obligation of phrases using a visual analogue scale (VAS, range 0 - 100). The questionnaire consists of 13 commonly used phrases, 13 rarely used/ specific expressions as well as certain demographic items (e.g. age, gender, specialization). Survey was online between 22-Feb and 08-May-2012. Descriptive data analysis was performed with IBM SPSS 19.

Results

In total we received 447 responses, of which 409 were complete. 415 responses contained at least all information of the VAS and were therefore evaluated. 90.4 % of participants were dermatologists, 3.4 % psychiatrists, 3.6 %, general practitioners, and 2.7 % other. 41.7 % were female and 58.3 % male.

The terms “sollte” and “soll” were interpreted with nearly the same grade of obligation (mean 72.00 vs. 70.77). Whereas “kann empfohlen werden” has a lower perceived obligation of 48.57 (mean). „Darf nicht“ and „muss“ are clearly understood as a strong obligation (mean 97.00 vs. 95.51).

Sentences using a negation with “nicht” yielded very strong deviations in their perceived obligation.

Discussion

Currently suggested wordings used in guidelines such as “soll”, “sollte”, and “kann” are a first valuable approach for standardization. Our evaluation revealed that some of these phrases can not be accurately differentiated including the terms “soll” and “sollte”. Whereas “kann empfohlen werden” (less obligation) can be distinguished more clearly from “soll” and “sollte”. Negative statements containing the word “nicht” were easily misunderstood (in terms of skipping the word “nicht”). The directive terms “darf nicht” and “muss” were interpreted more homogeneously, but may not be very suitable for guidelines texts.

Certain terms might be useful but based on our survey a clear set of wording can not yet be recommended. A further online survey will be performed to investigate the influence on additional symbols to enhance clearness of the wording.

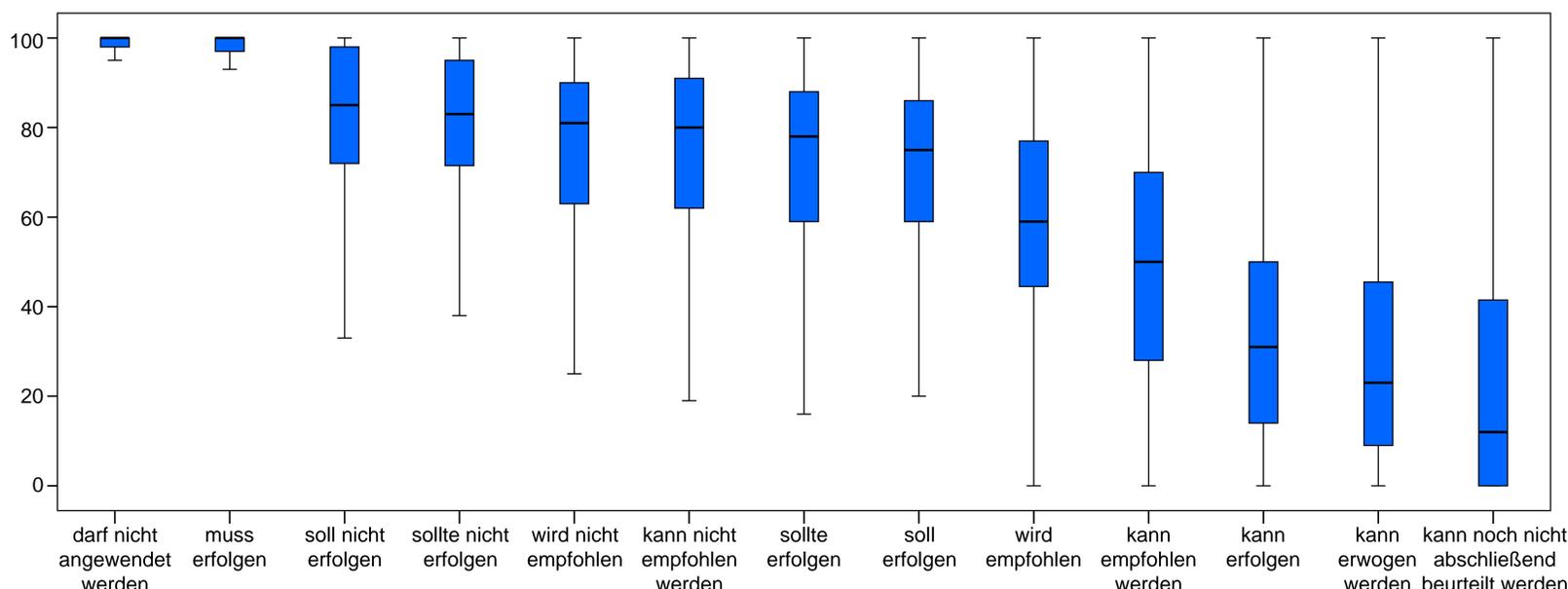


Figure 1: Box plot with the results of the perceived grade of obligation of frequently used phrases of recommendations in German guidelines (n = 415, 0 = no obligation, 100 = full obligation, descendingly sorted by mean grade of obligation).