

COMMUNICATION SKILLS – AN AREA OF CONCERN IN MEDICAL EDUCATION

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Abstract: A surgeon, usually a stranger to begin with, spends few outpatient sessions with her patient. During these sessions of about 15-45 minutes each, a bond of trust is formed between the patient and her surgeon. Based upon this trust, the patient allows the surgeon to physically enter and change her body and to alter the very mannerism in which the patient interacts with the environment and self. Through this trust, the patient risks potential long term harm, disability or even loss of life. It is the formation of this bond of trust and the implied duties that need to be addressed. Changing social structure, empowerment of patients and dwindling humanness has aroused the need for building blocks for the trust in question. A shift from being a stranger to being the keeper and sole guardian of body, soul and faith reposed is possible only with relationship building skills. Communication is the first brick to be laid. We intend to put across this aspect and its utility in surgical practice.

“You don’t need to have pain in your right iliac fossa to diagnose a patient’s appendicitis”

INTRODUCTION

To be regarded as good doctor effective communication with the patient is being recognized as an important trait. Communication is a major component of medical management and sometimes it is all that doctors have to offer. Poor communication skills have been shown to be an indicator of future litigation and burnout¹. In a career span of 40 years doctors conduct almost 200000 interviews with their clients. This is greater than number of any medical procedures performed, so it is better that doctors recognize that talking matters.

Doctor-patient relationship is the sacred foundation of a healthcare system. Communication is to relationship what breathing is to life. Hence, communication skills are necessary for medical students and have been made a core subject in many medical schools.

The word communication originated from Latin ‘Communicare’ which means “to share”. The word doctor similarly means “I care”. Isn’t it said “Half the sorrows are solved if you share them with somebody”

BENEFITS OF PROPER COMMUNICATION

- Patient’s problems are accurately identified
- Patients get a better understanding of their problem
- Their anxiety / distress level is minimized
- They become a partner in decision
- Doctors make less errors
- Doctors face less chance of litigation
- Doctor’s overall well being gets a boost

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Communication looks easy when done well. But doctors face difficult situations on daily basis. They need to comprehend and crystallize complex information and respond to diversity of social factors. Sometimes, they have to deliver the worst news. They have to do all this under pressures of time and schedule and under the hawk eye of society. So communication is not easy always and things do go wrong.

WHEN AND WHY THINGS GO WRONG ?

- Changes in health care delivery system and their continuous evolution put an additional burden on doctors
- Doctors are dealing with more complex diseases and newer diseases
- Doctors deal with variety of treatment options arising out of technoindustrial onslaught.
- Legislation keep on changing
- Doctors are bogged down by the need to generate revenue

Most of the doctors are aware to all these and adapt appropriately but at times their behavior is seen as unprofessional by the society.

WHAT IS PERCEIVED AS UNPROFESSIONAL BEHAVIOUR ?

- Arrogance / disrespectfulness
- Prejudices vis a vis gender, caste, race etc
- Abrasiveness or rudeness
- Abandonment / strategic absence in case of unexpected or unfavorable outcome.

But the good news is that patient’s still want to trust their doctor but the trust has to be earned by treating patients as grown ups, answering their question honestly, listening to their views and involving them in decisions². Various studies have identified ‘humanness’ as a factor in health care rated higher than competency / accuracy³. So there is a need of

marriage between the applied scientist and the medical humanist⁴. Improvement in soft skills goes a long way in achieving this.

Building The Doctor – Patient Communication

Establish the initial rapport

- Greet the patient (with name if known)
- Obtain patient's name
- Introduce yourself
- Clarify your role

Survey the reason for patient's visit

- Allow the patient to complete her opening statement
- Invite her to tell her stay chronologically
- Active listening
- Summarize and define her concerns

Medical History Taking

- Doctors are taught this in detail in their curriculum

Manage Flow

- Provide the structure to interview / history
- Summarize periodically

All this seems very easy. Surprising fact is that it takes only 18-23 seconds for a doctor to interrupt their patient once. She has started speaking, so listening becomes an important part in this relationship. Speaking is important but whenever in doubt it is better to listen.

FACTS ABOUT CONVERSATION⁵

- Our words account for only 7% of the impression we make in first 30 seconds of face-face interaction
- Our vocal quality accounts for 35%
- Body language 58%
- It is only after 30 seconds, that the content becomes important

How to Improve Conversation ?

- ***Volume adjustment*** – volume should be adjusted to match those you are speaking to. Also selectively raising and lowering the volume has a powerful and a dramatic impact.
- ***Body language*** – too many body movements distract your listener and take away their ability to concentrate on your words. So keep calm and still. Shuffling of papers, fidgeting with files / mobile phones / laptops or repetitive gestures take away your impact
- ***Gestures*** – Gestures used appropriately and in small doses enhance your ability to present information
- ***Demeanor*** – Your demeanor should be confident and display respect & humility. Your respect for the patient should be genuinely visible.

The empathic response is a technique consisting of 3 steps¹

1. Identifying the emotion
2. Identifying the source of emotion
3. Responding in a way that shows that you have made the connection between the first two steps

LISTENING

Listening is the most important and equally neglected art of

communication. God knew that listening was twice as hard as talking hence he gave us two ears but one mouth.

Doctors need to practice and acquire listening skills because the information cannot be thrown like a dart at a passive dashboard. Information is an intangible virtue that needs to be conveyed by speaker and received by an active listener⁶.

- ***Be a good listener*** - Doctors have to spend a lot of energy comprehending the information thrust upon them. So it is important that they develop a body language from that of a deflector to that of a receiver like a satellite dish. Our faces contain all the receptive equipments of our body so it is better that we tilt our faces towards our patient.
- ***Establish eye and face contact*** – Doctor should use their other bodily receptors besides the ears. They can be better listener while looking at the patient. Their eyes should be trained to pick up non-verbal clues being conveyed by the patient. It can be achieved by making a good eye contact. Your eyes help complete the communication circuit that must be established with your patient. Your gaze should be at a triangle the base of which is made by the eyebrows of the patient and the apex by the Cupid's bow of her philtrum
- ***React to the speaker*** – By sending out non verbal signals by way of facial gestures, nods or gentle body movements, you can make your patient more comfortable and easy to communicate.
- ***Stop talking*** – It is extremely difficult to receive information when your mouth is moving information out at the same time. Use the “I see..... un hunh....oh really” words and phrases that follow and encourage your patients train of thoughts. This forces you to react to the information presented rather than the person.
- ***Concentrate*** – Move your mind to concentrate on what the speaker is saying. You cannot fully hear their point of view or process information when you argue mentally or judge what they are saying before they have completed.

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RECOMMENDED READING

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