

Doctor-Patient Communication: An Introduction for Medical Students

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Introduction

- | **A special and changing relationship**
- | **The importance of talking**
 - | Why Don't Doctors Talk To Patients In Language They Can Understand?
 - | Why the patient doesn't understand what the doctor is saying
- | **Communication skills and strategies**



A special relationship

| sacred (and legally- and morally-bound) relationship

- | The basis: patient's ability to trust the doctor with their well-being, and even their lives.

| In the past

- | Doctor's position: power and of benevolent superiority (as parent, decision-maker)
- | Patient's position: particular vulnerability, dependence (as children, decision-accepter)



What happened now?

I **Patient:**

- I More doctor-dependent
- I But Less dependent on doctor

I **Doctor:**

- I Economic pressure: cost-cutting strategies
- I Social pressure



A changing relationship

- | Doctor's position: medical service-supplier?
- | **Patient's position:** partners, equally participating in diagnosis and treatment

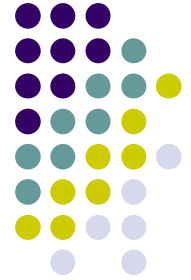
Business contract??



Who's to blame?

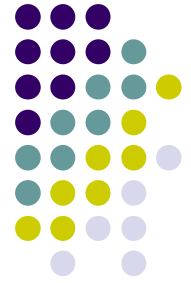
I researchers have found that problems rest mainly on the doctor's side:

- I Doctors do more talking than listening. (Korsch et al, 1998).
- I Doctors often ignore the patient's emotional health.
- I Doctors underestimate the amount of information patients want and overestimate how much they actually give.
- I Doctors who can't communicate are more likely to have a malpractice case brought against them.



Who's to blame?

- | **Patients aren't perfect either. Patients described as "frustrating" by doctors often:**
 - | do not trust or agree with the doctor.
 - | present too many problems for one visit.
 - | do not follow instructions.
 - | are demanding or controlling. (Levinson et al, 1993)



Communication is very important

- I Indeed, numerous studies have shown that doctors are not always good communicators
- I Communication skills are rarely taught or even considered during medical training.



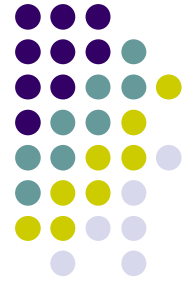
The importance of talking

- | “Talking to the patient is clearly the most important thing we doctors do.”
- | “We do it (talking) more than anything else in our daily practice.”
 - | *Dr. F. Ameer, medical practitioner at the Bardon Clinic in Brisbane.*



The importance of talking

- | **The most powerful diagnostic tool:** obtain primary the patient's history in two ways.
 - | the patient answers the doctor's questions
 - | patient tells the doctor things without being asked



The importance of talking

- | **Three factors that doctors often fail to consider are:**
 - | the doctor may not be asking the right questions to the patient
 - | the doctor may not give the patient the opportunity to speak freely about their problems or concerns
 - | the doctor may not be really listening to what the patient is trying to tell them.

The importance of talking



- | Dr Rosenbaum: *Did you ever tell that to the psychiatrists?*
- | Patient: No.
- | Dr Rosenbaum: *Why not?*
- | Patient: *They never asked me.*



The importance of talking

I “*What other medications are you taking?*”

VS

I “*Tell me about all of the pills you put in your mouth.*”

Why Don't Doctors Talk To Patients In Language They Can Understand?



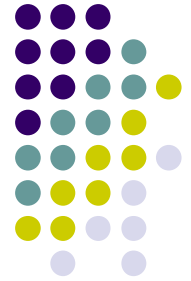
- | **Technical terms**
- | **Equal partners**
 - | explain things in terms patients can understand.
 - | create an atmosphere where patients are not embarrassed

Why the patient doesn't understand what the doctor is saying



	doctor	patient
illness	a disease process	disruption and threat to life
Emotional focus	No	Many feelings
subjects	machine	human

Don't assume patients always understand



- I It is important for doctors to find out early on in their contact with patients how much they understand about their illness.



- | **The use of communication feedback strategies by the doctor to ensure that patients have understood the information provided to them can:**
 - | reduce the need to repeat the information later,
 - | reduce the patient's anxiety because the information is accurate and clear,
 - | reduce the blame apportioned to the physician,



I The use of communication feedback strategies by the doctor to ensure that patients have understood the information provided to them can:

- I reduce the likelihood of patient dissatisfaction and later claims,
- I build trust and enhance the relationship with the patient,
- I increase the doctor's professional satisfaction and sense of pride.

Communication skills and strategies



- | Active listening
- | Nonverbal communication
- | Agendas
- | Empathize
- | Educating patients
- | Reassurance
- | Agreeing on a treatment plan
- | Taking responsibility
- | Avoid Overreacting



The doctor's role

- | The doctor needs to pay full attention towards patient's symptoms, their story and above all their anguish and sufferings.
- | Listening to the patient is very important even if the diagnosis is clear.



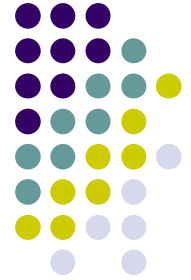
The doctor's role

- | Maintenance of patient's confidentiality is absolutely essential and should never be breached without proper cause.
- | Maintaining accurate and complete patient records is absolutely necessary both for the doctor and the patient, perhaps even more so for the doctor.



The doctor's role

- | Patient should be offered choice and alternatives, not in a superficial manner but in a very formal manner so that the patient can feel a part of the decision making process.
- | Doctor should never put their own prestige first by holding onto patients longer than required.



The doctor's role

- | If the patient or their family must be given bad news about the nature of the disease, it should be done in a way to minimize the trauma.
- | The consent taken for any procedure should not be a mere formality but should be explained to the patient fully in clear language and at their own level.



The doctor's role

- | Doctor should concentrate on the problems before them and not be judgmental about a patient's personal habits or attitudes.



The patient's role

- I choose their doctor or the hospital carefully and with awareness.
- I provide full information about their illness and all the relevant social and family background.
- I not hesitate to ask for as much information as they want or clarify any instructions.



The patient's role

- I immediately report any adverse drug reactions they have or any other unforeseen happening.
- I understand the risk involved in a procedure or operation.
- I ask the doctor for any alternatives or choices available. This is their right.



The patient's role

- I know that medical science is a biological science and lots of decisions are made on the basis of
- I experience and personal judgment. Many things cannot be fully explained or predicted.
- I avoid seeing multiple doctors and trying to play one against the other.



The patient's role

- I refrain from experimenting with alternative medicines without the doctor's knowledge.
- I avoid believing in hearsay or rumors and be skeptical of "facts" printed in advertisements or non-professional publications.
- I carefully read the consent form for any procedure, try to understand its implications and ask for



The patient's role

- | clarifications if required.
- | differentiate between a complication or mishap and negligence, and not blame the doctor solely
- | for every thing that goes wrong.

