

Effective Communication in Clinical Practice and Teaching

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Abstract

Communication is a spontaneous essential component in human behaviour. Professional communication requires skill and expertise which needs to be learned and practiced. Effective communication builds a strong doctor-patient relationship and is essential in gaining trust and confidence. Key areas for effective communication for physician is discussed here..

Keywords: Communication; Clinical Practice; Doctor-Patient Relation.

Clinical practice requires effective communication by the treating doctor with the patient and family members. Effective communication wins the physician the confidence and respect of patients and their relatives and helps build a healthy doctor-patient relationship. These soft skills can be learned during the graduation and post graduation years and then practiced to perfection.

Communication skills in a teaching Institution is one of the most important skills that physicians in academic and community practice should strive to acquire. Often this skill is not formally taught but is caught by observing seniors. Serious disasters in effective communication between physicians and patients & their relative can lead to disastrous results; often culminating in misbehaviour and hostility towards doctors. News in media regarding misbehaviour of patient's attendants and medical fraternity often results for a trivial cause, culminating in violence against doctors. In medical colleges sometimes we hear stories of unproductive communication among physicians speaking to each other.

One of the common failure in communicating information is due to inaccurate or inattentive listening.

Misunderstandings may result if an individual fails to comprehend what is being said either explicitly or implicitly. This then requires prolonged dialogue and discussion and before resolution is achieved. We all have witnessed, confusion resulting when careful listening is not practised.

So, how does one learn to effectively communicate? First step toward this is by listening effectively, which requires a conscious effort by the listener in order to understand what the speaker is trying to communicate. This active listening needs focussed effort by the listener. If the listener is distracted by thoughts or smart phone which we see commonly today; the message other is trying to give will not reach us completely or might be misunderstood. Patient may perceive it as irritation or may not be able to confide in you and may not give important information which may alter the diagnosis or management. We can put ourselves in patient's shoes and if my treating physician is distracted by phone is not paying attention to what is being said it will definitely irritate me, and I may have the opinion of doctor being discourteous! Focussing one's attention actively and consciously on what is being said by the patient is the first step towards effective communication.

Too much use of technical words or jargons with a person not conversant with those terms is a clear sign of communication failure. Simple language and commonly used words preferably in local language will make the patient and their relatives understand the disease, treatment options and complications should they arise. Use of abbreviations or short forms often leads to confusion for the layman, and hindrance in understanding. Each failure interferes

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with effective communication and understanding.

Healthcare team should communicate with patient and their relatives in easy to understand language avoiding abbreviations and technical jargons.

Patient often asks questions related to diseases or treatment involved; It is important to listen the questions carefully, and then answer them appropriately. If the questions are not clear, clarification or repeating the question may be asked for and then appropriately answered. Often patients say, "Doctor did not answer my questions" which brings a bad name to the treating physician. Communication with a sick patient and their relatives requires special skills and involves multiple of issues beyond the mere telling of facts or figures. It is important to focus on patients expression, speak slowly and in a easy to understand language avoiding too much of technical words which are difficult to understand. Making the patient comfortable and sit while talking to him/her shows respect for the individual and is well perceived by the patient too. Breaking bad news to patients also needs skill in dealing such difficult situation.

Compassionate attitude of the treating doctor brings a lot of satisfaction and trust, and is potentially helpful for preventing misbehaviour.

Medical students often pick up these skills by observing their seniors and teachers; so it is important to become a good role model for them. Nowadays many colleges have included how students communicate with patients in their performance assessment.

Inter-departmental consultations are frequently needed in hospitals. Clinical response in such cases should be restricted to the reasons consultation is asked for and communicated in legible handwritings. With patient data and case records becoming electronic at many places over the world, problem of illegible handwriting is taken care of.

In the teaching colleges or conferences doctors are frequently giving scientific deliberations with a power point presentation. Medical college doctors are taking lectures and clinical classes for their graduates and post-graduate students. It is important to look professional in their appearance and their communication, so that they become

a role model for the young aspiring doctors. If teaching is being done with help of power point presentations it is important to keep slides simple, and not everything is written on slides and one just reads out what is written!. If the slide is full of sentences, and cannot be read from a distance, it fails to convey the message it is desired to do. Keeping it simple with 5-6 sentences per slide and a readable size of letters or font should be practice. Also the pace of speaking should be appropriate for the audience, too fast or too slow may miss the point one wants to convey in his/her scientific deliberations.

In conclusion, effective communication is skill that needs to be inculcated in every medical student, needs to be constantly worked upon. Active listening, simple language, empathy, avoiding medical abbreviations and jargon, and responses/answers tailored according to patients understanding and needs are helpful methods for effective communication with patients and their relatives.

Early and conscious learning by the medical student in their graduation and post-graduation by observing and practicing will make them proficient in this required essential skill. This skill is needed throughout their medical career.

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