

Communication Skills in Medicine

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Having good communication skills is essential for doctors to establish good doctor patient relationship. Many undergraduate and postgraduate medical education and training programmes have made the attainment of good communication skills a core requirement. The recognition of the importance of doctor patient relationship and communication in medicine has particular relevance for primary care physician whose discipline has long focused on the importance of the doctor patient relationship and quality health care delivery.

THE DOCTOR-PATIENT RELATIONSHIP

Doctors must never forget that patients are individual human beings with problems that often transcend their physical complaints. Doctors should instill confidence and be reassuring but should never be arrogant. A professional attitude, coupled with warmth and openness, can do much to alleviate anxiety and to encourage patients to share all aspects of their medical history. The ideal doctor-patient relationship is based on thorough knowledge of the patient, mutual trust and the ability to communicate. There is evidence that good communication leads to accurate history-taking and diagnosis, patient's compliance with their treatment plan and patient's satisfaction with the care they receive.¹ An important issue to be addressed is breaking bad news to a patient. In this regard, openness and honesty with a patient is a must. The doctor should provide for emotional, physical and spiritual social support and the patient must be given an opportunity to talk openly with the doctor and ask questions.

IMPROVED HEALTH, FUNCTIONAL AND EMOTIONAL STATUS

Good doctor patient communication has been shown to have a positive impact on a number of health outcomes in previous studies. In a study that explored the effects of communication-skills training on the process and outcome of care associated with patient's emotional distress, improvement in clinician's communication skills was shown to be associated with a reduction in emotional distress in patients (Roter et al, 1995)². In a review of 21 randomised controlled trials and analytic studies on the effects of doctor-patient communication on patient health

outcomes, the quality of communication in both history taking and discussion of the management plan was found to be associated with health outcomes (Stewart, 1995)³. Better doctor patient communication was shown to be associated with better emotional and physical health, higher symptom resolution, and better control of chronic diseases that included better blood pressure, blood glucose and pain control. More recently, in a study conducted on 39 randomly selected family physician offices and 315 patients, Stewart et al (2000) showed that the degree of patient-centred communication was associated with less discomfort, less concern and better mental health in patients.

COMPLIANCE WITH MEDICAL TREATMENT

Low compliance with prescribed medical interventions is an important problem in medical practice and it is associated with substantial medical cost including increased hospital admissions. It has been shown that doctor's attitude towards his patients, his ability to elicit and respect the patients' concerns, the provision of appropriate information and the demonstration of empathy and the development of patient trust are the key determinants of good compliance with medical treatments in patients (DiMatteo, 1994; Safran et al, 1998)⁴. Furthermore, training doctors to improve their communication skills could potentially be cost-effective as it increases compliance which in turn improves the overall health of patients (Cegala, 2000)⁵.

IMPROVED PATIENT SATISFACTION

Effective doctor patient communication is shown to be highly correlated with patient satisfaction with health care services. In a study (Jackson, 2001)⁶ involving 500 patients who were seen by 38 primary care clinicians for physical symptoms, aspects of patient doctor communication such as "receiving an explanation of the symptom cause, likely duration, and lack of unmet expectations" were found to be the key predictors of patient satisfaction. Patient satisfaction is an important area that deserves our attention because dissatisfaction with health care services can result in litigation against doctors by patients, unnecessary health care expenditure due to repeated visits, both could be very costly for the health care system.

IMPROVED CLINICIAN SATISFACTION

In a study conducted in the outpatient division of a teaching hospital, it was shown that clinician's satisfaction with their professional life was associated with greater patient trust and confidence in their primary care physicians (Grembowski D, 2004). It seems that clinicians who are themselves more satisfied may be better able to address patient's concern (Hall, 1990).

REDUCES MEDICAL MALPRACTICE RISK

In a study that explored plaintiff depositions to study reasons that instigate patients to file malpractice claims against doctors, Beckman et al (1994)⁹ identified relationship problems between doctor and patient being an important factor in 71% of depositions. These problems of relationship between doctor and patient included "deserting the patient", "devaluing patient and/or family views", "delivering information poorly" and "failing to understand the patient and or family perspective".

The authors concluded that the patient's decision to litigate against doctors is often associated with a perceived lack of caring and collaboration in health care delivery in doctors. As malpractice claims are increasing in India over the last several years, this area will become an important topic for health administrators, physicians and health service researchers.

CONCLUSION

Good doctor patient communication is important and has multiple impacts on various aspects of health outcomes. The impacts included better health outcomes, higher compliance to therapeutic regimens in patients, higher patient and clinician satisfaction and a decrease in malpractice risk. Medical education has started to emphasise the importance of communication between doctor and patient and start to include the teaching of communication skills in many undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Extra effort to improve communication and relationship with patients would help to reduce complaints, improve compliance and reduce unnecessary investigation. Government of Gujarat has framed laws for protection of doctors on duty in the wake of increasing assaults on doctors by patients' kin. So it becomes our moral duty to be compassionate and more communicative with patients. Doctors should be attentive to the patients' complaints and not ignore them, however insignificant they may seem.

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