

Communication skills

Ashish Ranade

Communication is an important aspect in medical practice. In fact, it is a core clinical skill that every doctor should master. This communication may be between doctor-patient, colleagues, caregivers etc. Each has its own role in giving and maintaining better care to the patient.

In a survey conducted by Tongue et al¹, only 21% patients said that they had satisfactory communication with their doctors. This in contrast to the fact, that 75% orthopaedic surgeons were convinced that they had communicated satisfactory with the patients. Communication skills have never been a formal topic of study in our medical colleges unlike in many other countries where medical students are taught and even examined on it. It is important to stress the same since early days of medical college and teach to improve as not all are born with it.

So what is the importance of communication skills?

A doctor should listen attentively to the patient. He should show empathy and try to understand the patient's problems beyond the pathology. This will ensure patient's faith and minimise non-compliance. It will also increase patient's involvement in the treatment. The ultimate goal of any doctor-patient relationship is to deliver better patient care. The deliverance of better care leads to patient satisfaction. This will also facilitate reduction in complaints and litigations. Breaking bad news is always difficult and complex. Many times a doctor tends to shy away from it or avoids it. This generates confusion, anger and resentment in the minds of the patient and the relatives. It is of utmost importance that these issues are handled gently and explanations are given in details. It is necessary to talk to the patient and the relatives in a language they understand and are comfortable with.

Good communication with colleagues in a multidisciplinary approach and with nursing staff and caregivers prevents mishaps and confusion. Clear communication with junior doctors improves patient management and the training. Doctors do face a lot of problems when dealing with patients in our country. Huge differences in rural/urban cultures, presence of a lot of relatives, inability to communicate with one single relative who would take decisions after consulting with the family, illiteracy, ambiguity of laws and overburden of work do hamper effective communication. This leads to feelings of discontent and discord and may even lead to physical and verbal abuse!

How can we then improve our practice? Training right from medical college, learning from experienced seniors in the field, having a mentor who would guide to handle difficult conversations are a few of the suggestions. Having patient feedback is one of the important methods to improve communication skills. Taking time to listen to each patient and making an effort to understand with empathy will lead a long way to deliver better patient care.

We have to remember that a patient wants a doctor who can treat him as well talk to him effectively!

Dr Ashish Ranade
Editor JMOA

Reference:

1. Tongue JR, Epps HR, Forese LL. Communication skills for patient-centered care: research-based, easily learned techniques for medical interviews that benefit orthopaedic surgeons and their patients. *J Bone Joint Surg Am.* 2005; 87:652-658.

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