Communication skills

Staying patient focused

Background
Poor communication between doctor and patient may result in complaints. Good communication can offer significant benefits to you, your patients, their relatives and your colleagues.

Research has shown that good communication skills can positively impact on patients’ symptoms and even help resolve them through the placebo effect. By being a good communicator you can positively influence the way patients feel about their illnesses and symptoms.

Good communication skills

Listening
Good communicators listen. Research has shown that many doctors interrupt patients within the first twenty seconds of them starting to describe their symptoms. The doctor jumps in to ask questions, keen to make the diagnosis as quickly as possible. But when doctors do this, patients are much more likely to show the ‘hanging on the door frame’ sign, which means that when the patient is leaving the consultation room, they stop at the door and say ‘Oh doctor, what I really wanted to tell you about was…the pain in my chest…the blood in my urine.’

And then you have to begin again and that takes longer than if you had listened in the first place. In reality, you don’t have to listen for as long as you may think. On average, patients take less than 30 seconds to complete this initial monologue in primary care settings and around 90 seconds in specialist outpatients.

Eye contact
While you listen you need to focus on the patient. In Western cultures we know someone is interested in us if they are looking at us. Eye contact is how we know someone is listening to and interested in what we are saying. Be aware however, that in some cultures, to maintain eye contact in this way can be disrespectful.

Using the patient’s own words
Another way to show you have been listening is to use the patient’s own words. If they describe their pain as ‘a hot prickle’, then use these words exactly, try to avoid putting your own interpretation on it. By actively listening in this way you will build rapport. As rapport builds, the patient will trust you more and tell you more. They are also more likely to listen to you when it is your turn to speak.

Matching
Another way to build rapport with people is to match them. People live in their own world and try to make sense of other people’s worlds. The more they think someone else’s world is like their own, the more rapport they will have with them.

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To match someone you need to reflect their own world back to them. You can do this by matching body language, breathing, tone and volume of voice, their values and any number of features they exhibit. This is not about copying. This is a respectful matching of some aspects of how people communicate in order to put them at their ease.

Questioning
Recently there has been an increasing trend towards patient-centred care; involving the patient in their own treatment. This significantly increases compliance. You can begin this process by asking the patient about what their thoughts, beliefs and concerns are about their illness. What do they think is causing it? What have they tried so far that has helped? What has been the effect of the symptoms on their life?

Try to start with open questions and then move to closed questions to get a more precise understanding.
Understanding patient expectations
A significant factor affecting both the patient and your own satisfaction with the consultation, is the patient’s expectations. What are they expecting to happen today? What questions would they particularly like to get answered? Once you know the answer, you can be realistic about what you can and can’t achieve and ensure at the end of the interview you have addressed these particular issues.

Signposting
If you have ever been a patient yourself you may well have experienced arriving home after a consultation remembering only some of what the doctor said. There are a number of ways you can significantly increase the amount of information a patient remembers. Begin by making it clear to the patient where you are in the process of the consultation and what is going to happen next. This is known as signposting. The longer you are a doctor, the less likely you are to remember what it is like to be a layperson. A female patient won’t necessarily understand why you want to listen to their heart and so have to move their left breast out of the way when, as far as they are concerned they came in with a tummy ache. So explain what you are doing and why, before you do it. This can help avoid misinterpretations by patients.

Top 10 communication skills
In summary, the top 10 communication skills are as follows.
1. Eye contact and posture.
2. Increasing rapport by matching.
3. Nodding and active listening.
4. Using the patient’s language.
5. Empathy: seeing things from the patient’s perspective.
6. Moving from open to closed questions.
7. Not interrupting at the beginning.
8. Being patient centred – what is the patient’s understanding, belief or concern? What do they want addressed?
9. Increasing patient’s recall by asking them to repeat back in their own words.
10. Acknowledging and reflecting on how the patient appears, e.g. upset.

Understanding and recall
Many doctors draw diagrams for patients to take away and use patient information leaflets for them to refer to later. One of the simplest ways is to ask the patient to repeat in their own words what they have understood. This can increase recall by up to 30%.

We run courses on effective patient communication skills. For more information please visit themdu.com/learn

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