

## Communicate effectively, as a medical care giver

In today's medical centers, patients have a one in four chance of seeing a foreign-born physician. Accent and language barriers as well as cross-cultural communication issues can directly impact the patient-caregiver relationship and affect the quality of care.

Healthcare providers must be efficient, adaptable, credible, empathetic, and accurate when communicating with patients and family members who are often stressed, fatigued, anxious, and overwhelmed.

The following are some practical tips for achieving communication success in this difficult setting.

▶ **Identify yourself:** When greeting a patient, use the patient's name, make eye contact, and introduce yourself by name and title. Patients need to know if you are a physician, resident, student, aide, therapist, dietician, or food service employee.

▶ **Listen to the patient:** Observe the patient carefully. Listen to what he or she is saying, both non-verbally and verbally. Attend to facial expressions, gestures, and body language as well as words.

This will help to establish trust and rapport and may increase compliance with medical recommendations.

▶ **Avoid use of medical jargon:** Professional terminology used with colleagues may be a source of confusion for many patients and family members. Vocabulary should be as simple as possible to minimize misinterpretation. If jargon must be used, terms should be explained, defined, and/or demonstrated. Caregivers should also

take the time required to discuss procedures, diagnoses, treatment plans, and precautions to ensure patient understanding. Ask the patient to repeat back the information to assess comprehension.

▶ **Speak clearly:** Rapid or accented speech can disrupt communication. Speak slowly and clearly using proper grammar as well as correct word and sentence structure. Healthcare providers who are nonnative English speakers must correctly pronounce the names of medications, procedures, other specialists' names, etc. to avoid causing frustration and lack of understanding.

▶ **Provide written instructions:** Patients and family members often forget details once they leave an appointment. Provide written instructions to increase understanding and compliance. A recent trend has been to ask patients to sign documents to verify that the patient was informed and understands what is requested of him or her.

▶ **Treat the patient and family with respect:** "You never get a second chance to make a first impression." This is particularly true in the medical environment. Once we set a first impression, whether it is positive or negative, it is difficult to change. Tailor all communication to each patient's level of ability. Don't assume that patients who are post-surgery or elderly are forgetful. Faulty assumptions can lead to negative consequences.

▶ **Speak directly to the patient:** Communicate with the patient. Although elderly patients may attend appointments with



family members, it is critical to actively include the patient in consultations and treatment planning. Due to the high incidence of hearing loss in the elderly population, use direct eye contact when speaking, talk at a slightly louder volume (do not shout), and speak slowly and clearly. If the patient has memory problems, be patient and repeat, paraphrase or use visual prompts.

▶ **Maintain professionalism:** Avoid confrontations amongst physicians, residents, interns, nurses, or aides. Conflicts or heated discussions should not occur within close proximity to patients, nor should socializing and gossip. This is disconcerting to the recipient of services and may even have legal ramifications.

▶ **Observe patient confidentiality:** Protect the patient's right to privacy at all times. Staff must exercise caution when dis-

cussing personal and sensitive patient information with team members on the telephone, in hallways, and in common areas such as the ER, cafeteria, or elevator.

▶ **Be aware of cultural differences:** Each culture observes different values and beliefs regarding communication style, authority, decision-making, hygiene, nutrition, medications, compliance with medical plans, family constellations, illness, and end of life decisions. Body language, physical distance, and touch vary from one culture to another. A full understanding of your own values and how they interface with your diverse patient population is critical to effective communication.

Optimal communication is critical in the healthcare setting. All patients and families want to receive the best care possible from a provider who cares about their needs, understands them, can explain information, and reassures them. All parties want a positive relationship which leads to an improved outcomes and quality care. Results will include diminished risk exposure, minimized patient attrition from group practices due to dissatisfaction, and an enhanced image for the medical practice, clinic, or hospital.

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