EDITORIAL

The Key to Communication Skills in the Patient-Physician Relationship

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INTRODUCTION

The patient-physician relationship is defined as "a consensual relationship in which the patient knowingly seeks the physicians' assistance and in which the physician knowingly accepts the person as a patient"[1]. Effective communication between physician and patient comprises skills in introducing, questioning, listening, facilitating and closing with the ultimate goal of patient care[2]. The patient-physician relationship embodies a profound interplay of vulnerability, trust, and authority within a professional environment. This dynamic bond forms the cornerstone of effective healthcare delivery, shaping the path to optimal patient outcomes[3]. It is recognized that a physicians' expertise and skills are not enough to excel in the eyes of patients truly, it is vital to possess outstanding interpersonal skills that foster trust, meaningful connections, and relationships with patients[4]. An effective patient-physician communication is an essential part of clinical practice as any medical decision comes from a collaborative process between physicians and patients. Anything wrong with this communication can cause a negative consequence in patient care, such as hindering patients' understanding and treatment planning and decreasing patient satisfaction[5]. In the current patient-physician relationship, patients and physicians participate in exchanging information. The patient-centred care considers patients as partners, with shared power in decision-making and responsibility for individual care with respecting their values[3,6]. Patient-centred communication strategies used by healthcare providers are able to engage with their patients and improve patient outcomes[7]. Ethically, it is the responsibility of a physician to explain to the patient about the disease, including its cause, progression, prognosis, treatment options, cost, etc. A well-explained discussion helps them to make a decision about the treatment and comply with the medical advice and drug compliance[8].

Effective communication is a complex process involving the communicator (or sender), the message, the audience (or receiver), and the medium through which communication occurs. This paper briefly explores key issues in patient-physician communication, including the elements

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essential to building patient trust, the benefits of strong communication, common obstacles, and strategies for improvement.

Uphold Trust in Patients

The patient-physician relationship is a sacred bond built on trust, respect and confidentiality. When patients select a physician, they are entrusting them with their well-being. In return, the physician promises to honour the patients' autonomy, uphold confidentiality, thoroughly discuss treatment options, obtain informed consent, deliver the best possible care, and ensure a smooth transition if the patient needs to seek a new physician. This partnership is rooted in mutual trust and commitment[1]. The patient-physician relationship is built on four crucial elements: mutual knowledge, trust, loyalty, and regard. Knowledge ensures a deep understanding between both parties, trust is rooted in faith and competence, loyalty embodies forgiveness and commitment, and regard signifies genuine care and support. These elements are the cornerstone of a strong and lasting patient-physician relationship[1,9]. The main goals of patient-physician communication are creating a good interpersonal relationship, facilitating the exchange of information, and including patients in decision-making[10].

Benefits of Good Communication

A physicians' communication skills are vital for gathering crucial information to ensure an accurate diagnosis, providing compassionate counselling, delivering clear therapeutic instructions and building trusting and caring relationships with patients, ultimately leading to better health outcomes[11]. By fostering effective communication and showing empathy, physicians can create a supportive environment that heightens the patient-physician relationship. This positive connection between physician and patients leads to better outcomes and increased patient satisfaction. It is truly uplifting to see how such relationships can positively impact the healthcare system[12].

Good patient-physician communication has the potential to help regulate patients' emotions, facilitate understanding of medical information, and allow for better identification of patients' needs, perceptions, and expectations[10]. Studies consistently show that effective communication between physicians and patients significantly affects health outcomes[13]. Effective communication during patient visits significantly influenced health outcomes, including emotional well-being, symptom resolution, daily functioning, improved physiological measures such as blood pressure and blood sugar, and pain control[13]. Improved mental health, decreased length of hospital stay, and cost savings are also noted[10].

Obstacles

The language barrier has been identified as an important obstacle in communication that can cause the patient not to be fully aware of the medical advice given by the doctor. Therefore, physicians need to know at least the basics of the patients' primary language. An interpreter can also help to overcome language barrier problems[8].

A long duty hour or attending a large number of patients can make a physician very tired, which can be reflected in poor behaviour toward the patient. Thus, the work burden can have a negative effect on communication with patients, ultimately increasing patient dissatisfaction[8]. The unprofessional behaviour of the physician, having a lack of empathy for the patient, showing no respect for the patients' time, not attending to the patients' questions, etc., will increase patient dissatisfaction. It is reported that interaction between the physicians and patients was significantly compromised when the cultural perspectives of the participants were ignored. Besides, lack of supportive health care services where physicians need to attend a large number of patients leaving less time for proper explanation to the patient was also noted[14].

Several factors impede effective communication between physicians and patients. These include insufficient formal training in communication skills, an overreliance on diagnostic tests and investigations, the practice of defensive medicine, conflicting clinical and financial objectives, and the pervasive influence of print, electronic, and social media. These elements detract from the essential human interaction that should characterize the patient-physician relationship[3].

Strategies for Improvement

Communication Skills Training

Communication skills training is essential for improving patient-physician communication[15]. A successful relationship between physicians and patients hinges on a delicate balance of

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nonverbal and verbal communication skills, content, and positive attitudes[11]. Developing strong verbal communication skills is essential in the healthcare field. This includes actively listening to patients, warmly greeting them, and developing questioning skills, including open-ended questions, conveying information, inspiring others to speak, and expressing genuine appreciation for their cooperation with sufficient time spent. These skills enhance patient care and contribute to a positive and trusting healthcare environment[11].

Nonverbal communication, such as body language, voice tone, pace, and mannerisms, is crucial in effective patient-physician communication. For instance, if a physician frequently turns away from the patient, prioritizes paperwork, or displays impatience during conversations, their authoritarian behaviour may convey to the patient a sense of being rushed or disinterested. This perception can lead to increased dissatisfaction with the quality of care, even if the medical advice is sound. Such dissatisfaction may ultimately result in patients choosing not to return[16]. Research indicates that smiling at their patients significantly increases their perception of the physicians' approachability[11].

In order to welcome the patient, it is necessary to establish eye contact, greet and appropriately address the patient. A brief social conversation can make the patient feel relaxed. Thus, a good welcome within the first few minutes of the visit gives the patient an excellent feeling of caring for the doctor, which helps advance further conversation and ultimately helps to build patient satisfaction[16]. Physicians need to develop the necessary competencies to precisely extract patients' medical histories and information compassionately[16].

Good communication skills equip physicians to effectively extract comprehensive, relevant, and accurate information about a patients' problem[8]. It is essential for clinicians to truly grasp the diverse worries that patients may have about their illness. These concerns may encompass fear of death or disability or attributing pain symptoms, loss of trust in the medical profession, impact on identity and independence, denial of the reality of their medical problems, sorrow, anxiety about venturing out, and various personal challenges[16]. Training in communication skills helps physicians extract the emotional and psychological stress of the patient and respond better according to their needs[10].

Breaking Bad News

Good communication is required in breaking bad news to patients, which is a complex and challenging task in the medical field. Miscommunication has profound implications, as it may hinder patients' understanding, treatment expectations, or involvement in treatment planning. In addition, miscommunication decreases patient satisfaction with medical care, level of hopefulness, and subsequent psychological adjustment[10]. Establishing a strong patient-physician relationship is essential for delivering bad news effectively. Professionalism, confidence, patience, and empathy are required to navigate this difficult task[8].

Empathy for Patient

Empathy is the ability to understand other persons' feelings, experiences, etc[17]. It is an essential part of patient-centred communication to maintain a good patient-physician relationship. Expressing empathy through nonverbal communication, such as touch if culturally appropriate, making eye contact, active listening and others can foster adherence in patients[18]. The tone of voice is a crucial aspect of showing empathy. A doctor should speak politely and calmly to help the patient feel relaxed and less stressed. It is important for the doctor to manage their anger, even when dealing with a demanding or confusing patient[8].

Patient Consent

Obtaining patient consent for confidentiality and privacy is one of the most crucial conditions for effective communication[11]. Consent-taking is a complex communicative, educational and trust-building process where the physician must balance his/her primary duty to promote the health and welfare of the patient while respecting the patients' wishes and preferences[19].

Conflict Management

Conflict is inherently challenging, as it tends to trigger a range of emotions such as helplessness, frustration, confusion, anger, uncertainty, failure, and sadness. It is crucial for doctors to not only recognize these feelings but also to develop the skills to identify and address unproductive responses, both in patients and themselves. By

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mastering these techniques, they can effectively de-escalate conflicts, turning relationship issues into pathways for clinical success.[10.]

Cultural Differences

Culture and ethnicity play an essential role in patient-physician communication. It is reported that certain patient information such as sexual activity, drug, alcohol intake, and mental health are more sensitive topics for discussion in Southeast Asia compared to Western countries[20]. Inadequate skills to communicate with patients involving the above issues leads to ineffective communication, resulting in missing patient information, impacting diagnosis and treatment[11]. Physicians must understand and adapt their communication styles with patients across cultures for effective interaction[16].

Patient Safety

Patient safety is a crucial element in health care services. It is affected by medical errors, which result in adverse consequences. It occurs when a medical or health care personnel is not willing to follow the standards in his/her profession and remains reluctant, thus causing injury to a patient. Therefore, a holistic approach is required to ensure patient safety and, thus, relieve them from their sufferings and distress[21]. Strong communication is essential in healthcare, as it significantly reduces medical errors that can have serious consequences[3].

Assessing Communication Utilizing the TEA Acronym for Effective Communication

The physicians' goal is to "cure sometimes, relieve often, and comfort always[2,15]." Achieving this goal relies heavily on effective communication. It is necessary to ensure that patients fully understand the information provided. It is not uncommon for a patient, particularly one who is feeling unwell, to nod along without fully grasping what their physician has communicated. To foster genuine understanding, it is important for physicians and other healthcare providers to check in by asking patients to share their understanding of the information. If the message has not been clearly conveyed, the physician should rephrase or clarify the explanation to enhance clarity. To help remember this process, we can use the acronym 'TEA,' where T stands for Tell, E for Explain, and A for Assess[22,23]. By following the TEA steps—Tell, Explain, Assess—physicians can enhance understanding through an iterative process. First, information is conveyed clearly; next, the physician actively checks for comprehension; and, if needed, they rephrase or simplify the explanation to ensure the patient fully grasps the message. This approach enables continuous feedback and creates a patient-centred dialogue, ultimately fostering trust and confidence. Given that tea is universally recognized, this acronym is easy to remember, reinforcing the importance of TEA in achieving effective, compassionate, and patient-centred care.

Conclusion

Strong communication skills are vital for effective patient management and fostering a positive patient-physician relationship. A thriving patient-physician relationship hinges on collaborative communication, where both parties engage in meaningful exchanges of information. This not only improves patient care but also leads to more successful outcomes. It is crucial to prioritize communication skills training in medical education, enhancing interactions that lead to tailored care meeting patients' unique needs. Tools like the TEA method—Tell, Explain, Assess—serve as practical, memorable frameworks for promoting clear, compassionate, and patient-centred communication. Building these skills not only strengthens the patient-physician relationship but also benefits the broader healthcare system by improving patient satisfaction, reducing errors, and promoting effective, ethical care.

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