



Professional Communication Skills and Etiquette for the Healing Profession

*– Habitual Display of Respect, Empathy
and Sincerity in Clinical Encounters*

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It is the reality of today's medical practice that patients have multiple chief complaints with a background of multiple medical comorbidities, and are looked after by multiple medical teams of doctors and allied health professionals. Patients zip in and out of hospitals with same day admission surgery, and outpatient ambulatory surgery and procedures. Doctors and nurses also zip in and out of hospitals with night-call days off, study leave, annual leave and training courses.

Effective communication skills, strategies and etiquette thus become critical not only to avoid errors, complaints and legal claims, but to establish the essential therapeutic doctor-patient relationship to ensure adherence to medical therapy and for good clinical outcomes.¹ Lack of time, clinician fatigue, heavy workload, and complexity of patient's clinical and emotional problems are commonly implicated as major causes of poor doctor-patient relationship building. Although more time enables better communication, time alone does not ensure better communication or patient satisfaction with the clinical encounter.²

Three domains which have been identified as contributing to good relationship building, perceived quality of care and communication efficacy are: rapport building, early agenda setting, and acknowledging the patient's social and emotional clues with empathy.³

Good communication skills in medical practice enable the display of respect, empathy and sincerity in all patient encounters. Respect for our patients includes respecting their wishes, expressing concern for their welfare, demonstrating sensitivity to their individual and cultural characteristics, and providing appropriate care regardless of patient characteristics. Displaying respect is the foundation of rapport building. Empathy is awareness of and relating to patients' experience and perspective of illness. Demonstrating empathy is recognising the emotional experience of patients' illnesses, conveying the emotional experience in the doctors' words to the patient, and offering a helpful statement and strategy. Sincerity involves developing a genuine interest in patients' welfare, providing time and help in a polite, kind and friendly manner. Sincerity in medical practice would be perceived as trustworthiness. Respect, empathy and sincerity are critical in establishing an effective therapeutic relationship and healing process.

The attributes of respect, empathy and sincerity can be translated into a set of listening, interviewing and interactional skills in clinical encounters. Effective communication etiquette ensures an appropriate introduction and closure for each doctor-patient clinical encounter.

This article aims to make these principles of respect, empathy and sincerity come alive in habitual basic clinical and interpersonal skills, for use at the beginning of clinical encounters (investing in the beginning). In this article, they are dissected into seven components for the purpose

of understanding. The seven components enable easier learning and teaching of effective communication skills in the opening of a medical interview or any clinical encounter to be weaved into daily practice.

Professional demeanour and dress code

First impressions and body language are of outmost importance in communication and establishing relationships. Patients expect doctors to be properly (not outrageously or too casually) dressed in a neat and clean outfit. Wearing appropriate attire not only shows respect for patients but also respect for ourselves and the work we do. Professional demeanour of politeness and friendliness are important first impressions in building rapport and establishing an effective relationship.⁴

Greeting the patient with eye contact

Greeting patients and making eye contact, especially with a smile, is effective in breaking the ice and establishing good rapport.⁴ Starting an interview without a greeting is often socially considered disrespectful and plain impolite.

Introduce self and your role in the medical team

A clear introduction stating your name (highlighted by pointing to your name tag) and designation in the healthcare team, with a clear voice at the right tone and volume, is part of being courteous and transparent. Patients would like to know the name and designation of the person who is attending to and caring for them. Being mindful of space and privacy is showing respect for patients. Removing barriers, distractions and ensuring privacy helps in communication. Sitting down at the patients' eye level is impactful on perception of a positive encounter.⁵

Confirm patients' name and other identifying data

Identifying patients, getting their names correct and calling them by name is all about showing respect. In addition, correct identification is an important safety measure to prevent treating the wrong patient, with the wrong medications and wrong procedures. For rapport building in the clinical encounter, use patients' names at least three times (at the beginning, when summarising, and at the end of the encounter).

Explain the aim and nature of the clinical encounter

Explaining the aim of the interview (agenda setting) shows transparency and helps patients prepare for what is coming increases their comfort level. Surprises (or ambushing patients) in the midst of the encounter is often perceived as insensitive, disrespectful and deceiving. Explaining is also part of the information giving aspect of the consent process during patients' clinical encounters.

Enquire the state of comfort of the patient

Asking how patients are feeling and observing their body language is an important way of showing empathy. Sick persons may often be in pain, breathless, confused, worried, and have concerns about being away from home. Acknowledging these discomforts is the first step in showing empathy and concern for the patients' welfare. Correcting these discomforts is showing empathy for their deprivations caused by illness. You can depict empathy in your behaviour and actions by being kind, friendly and helpful.

Seek consent to proceed

Everything in Medicine is consensual. Getting assent and consent from patients at all stages of the clinical encounter, especially at the beginning, is showing respect for their autonomy and setting the stage for a shared decision making communicative process.

Conclusion

Promoting respect for patient autonomy and concerns for the welfare of our patients need not remain in classrooms or as cliches in medical ethics books. It requires explicit practice of communication skills and etiquette to bring them to life in every clinical encounter. Starting every clinical patient encounter appropriately builds rapport, promotes empathy, and effectively ensures a good outcome and ending. Repeated practice and display of respect, empathy and sincerity (values) allows you to develop behavioural habits that build virtues (character) – becoming a physician who is competent, compassionate and trustworthy. **SMA**

References

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