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# COMMUNICATION SKILLS OF FAMILY PHYSICIANS IN A DOCTOR-PATIENT CONSULTATION

Waris Qidwai, Syed Irfan Karim and Farhana Masood Irfan

Effective communication skills are essential for medical practitioners. Studies have shown dissatisfaction with the communication skills of general practitioners.<sup>1</sup>

Evidence is emerging which suggests that communication skills of a physician have a direct impact on patient's satisfaction. It is also believed that a physician's training to improve communication skills can also enhance compliance with treatment, which is the ultimate outcome of doctor-patient consultation.<sup>2,3</sup>

There is growing evidence to suggest that a physician's effective communication has healing potential for the patient.<sup>4</sup> With the recent advances in technology and prospects of Telemedicine in future, the role of effective communication skills is expected to assume immense importance in future.<sup>5</sup>

A questionnaire-based survey was conducted at the Family Practice Center, Aga Khan University Hospital, Karachi, in March, 2003. The Aga Khan University Hospital is a teaching hospital in the private sector and offers secondary and tertiary level services in addition to primary health care. Approximately 12 Family Physicians work at the Family Practice Center daily at any given time and each see 10 to 12 patients in a four-hour half-day session.

The questionnaire recorded whether physician's practice was based on the principles of effective communication. Sixteen physicians were interviewed. Their average age was 36 years, ranging from 28 to 53 years. Nine were females and 7 males. Thirteen had postgraduate certification. The number of years in clinical practice ranged from one to 25 years. All had some continuing medical education but 14 had acquired formal training in Communication Skills. The responses of physicians are listed in Table I.

We have surveyed a small number of family physicians, practicing at a teaching hospital, with postgraduate qualifications and training in communication skills. The results of our survey are biased on account of these reasons and cannot be generalized to the rest of the practitioners in the country.

Results of our study are based on physician's responses and do not consider patient's viewpoint nor look at the actual practice. The majority of the physician's responses points towards the practice of effective communication with the patient. Greeting the patient and addressing in a warm, polite and friendly manner sets up a stage for a very fruitful doctor-patient interaction. Allowing the patient to express feelings and the physician's demonstration of empathy allows for the start of a warm doctor-patient relationship. Educating the patient is essential for effective communication since it improves understanding of the disease process. A majority of the doctors were not only giving follow-up advice but also providing information on what to do if a need arises before the next consultation.

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**Table I:** Response of physicians. N=16

Aspect in Doctor-Patient consultation	Always	Often	Sometimes	Never
Greet the patient, at the start of the consultation	13	03	-	-
Address patient by name	03	11	02	-
Address patient in a polite, warm, and friendly manner	13	03	-	-
Use open ended question to encourage patient expression	05	10	01	-
Facilitate patient express their feelings	08	07	01	-
Demonstrate empathy with the patient	08	08	-	-
Try to determine psychological, emotional and social needs of patient	08	08	-	-
Try to educate patient	12	04	-	-
Explain treatment options to patient	10	05	01	-
Explain risk/benefits of investigations and treatment to patients	06	08	02	-
Look for non-verbal cues during consultation	04	11	01	-
Involve patients in the treatment decisions	04	09	03	-
Summarize main points of consultation points at its conclusion	01	04	11	-
Follow-up advice given to patients	10	03	03	-
Inform patient what to do if help is required before next follow-up appointment	10	05	01	-
Able to judge patient satisfaction at the conclusion of the consultation	02	08	05	01
Judgmental during consultation	01	07	08	-

There are some deficiencies commonly observed, which if rectified can greatly build patient's confidence. A majority of the physicians do not summarize main points of consultation at its conclusion. There are physicians who are judgmental and, therefore, not in line with the current recommendation. To be judgmental means to form an opinion about someone due to one's beliefs, such as if a patient consumes alcohol than a judgmental physician will form a negative opinion about him. Some of the physicians do not judge patient's satisfaction towards the end of the consultation, a necessary step to help deal with the unsatisfied patients. Areas such as addressing the patient by name, involving in treatment decisions and giving follow-up advice, need improvement.

Communication skills survey points out the areas where deficiencies exist and also creates awareness among the practitioners to improve their communication skills.

Effective communication skills are necessary for medical practice and improves patient's satisfaction and compliance with treatment. We have found it useful to conduct a communication skills survey at our Family Practice Center, and recommend its practice by all medical practitioners.

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