Doctor-Patient Communication

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Are you listening to your patients? Are they telling you all that they should be? Why surgeon communication skills are crucial.

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I read a blog [1] yesterday in which the author wrote about her father. Her father has a significant family history related to cancer---his own father and his brother had died from the same form. Yet, the author found out that her father's primary care physician did not know about her father's history. Why? Her father never told him. He thought it was a lost cause. He had lost his father and brother, and he figured he was next. "We don't last very long" he says.

The communication element of any doctor-patient relationship can be a complex one. In this case, a patient failing to tell his doctor vital details of his family's medical history could be attributed to multiple factors:

- The patient lacks understanding of the importance of telling the doctor about health history and details.
- The patient feels uncomfortable talking about it.
- The patient talks, but the doctor doesn't listen as intently as necessary.
- The patient feels the doctor does not have time to listen. As the blogger writes, "While my dad is somewhat taciturn by nature, I know from previous conversations that my parents think talking to the doctor is an annoyance to the professional. Consciously or unconsciously, they view an overly engaged patient as a challenging patient."

In the surgical realm, the importance of communication among surgeons and OR staff is well-acknowledged. It's necessary that the entire OR team is on the same page in order to help prevent errors and infection .

However, the OR is often a bustling place, and surgeons and OR staff members are extremely busy. Amidst the commotion, is it possible that some patients get lost in the shuffle, and their voices are not always heard?

Studies show that most complaints by patients and the public about doctors involve communication, not clinical incompetency. In fact, the most common complaint is that doctors do not listen to their patients (1). Further, surgeons have often self-reported that their communication skills could be better. They cite lack of training [2] in proper communication as a primary cause. It seems learning to communicate may not be a focus in a surgeon's formal education.

Yet, communication between doctors and patients is key to patient care. In the case of this blogger's father, now that his PCP knew of his history, he could be sure to schedule routine tests and checks for the cancer. It was a simple as communicating the information from patient to doctor to help prevent this disease from taking his life the way it did his father and brother.

While patients have a responsibility to convey all important information about their health and history to the doctor, it is also part of the doctor's job to ensure that patients feel comfortable sharing this information and to listen to what the patient is saying intently, despite a hectic schedule.

A communication barrier between doctor and patient can severely hinder a patient's care and the ability for the doctor to do their job well. It is an element of being a surgeon that should be recognized and continually improved upon, but may be all-too-often ignored.

How well do you communicate with your patients? Have you experienced communication barriers? Tell me about them at amanda.mcgowan@advantagemedia.com [3]

Source:

(1) Improving doctor-patient communication: Not an option, but a necessity. Siegfried Meryn, Professor of internal medicine. Center for Advanced Medical Education and Health Communication, Medical Faculty, University of Vienna Borschkegasse 8 B, A-1097 Vienna, Austria, BMJ. 1998 June 27; 316(7149): 1922–1930. PMCID: PMC1113402

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