Doctors Speak Volumes Without Opening Their Mouths

Kathy Nieder, M.D.

All professions need good communication skills. Obviously in healthcare the ability to communicate with patients should rank high in a physician's list of talents. These days that interaction occurs in a number of ways: face-to-face, direct telephone contact or though a staff member, via emails, patient portals, or even texting. Because the communication is in the arena of medicine, the protection of an individual's health information is paramount. Enter HIPAA, which is a federally mandated program to ensure patient confidentiality.

The face-to-face form of interaction is the most rewarding because multiple senses are used in the process. First, I listen to the words while hearing the tenor of a patient's voice; a few octaves higher with anger or fear, deep and gnarly from years of smoking, "push" of speech in an anxious or grandiose individual, or an accent that might be heavy enough for me to wonder if there is a cultural or comprehension problem. Sight gives me other cues; body language–crossed arms, angry face, tearful, an open posture, a resigned facial expression, stiff limbs or back. Sometimes my sight reveals more concrete things–bizarre tattoos, picked at sores, expensive accessories, worn and torn clothing. My nose may be assailed by the scent of the smoker, too much perfume, not enough soap, musty clothing or pleasant shampoo–all of that speaks to me. Finally touch–dry and peeling skin, a mass somewhere it shouldn't be whose texture may speak to me of reassurance or of terror.

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