

COMMUNICATION SKILLS — A NECESSITY OR COSMETICS OF MODERN MEDICINE?

Doctors communicate with patients and their relatives/legal guardians, care-givers, nurses and auxiliary staff, colleagues and administrators. They may be required to give evidence in the court of law and collaborate with other researchers/United Nations agencies/Non-Governmental Organizations. They may need to talk to media/ Public/ legislative bodies, and report research findings (writing research paper), they have to maintain quality, originality and suitability to satisfy an intelligent and scientifically-informed audience including editors, reviewers, researchers, funding agencies, medical practitioners and medical epidemiologists. Thus doctors have many roles in modern medicine as shown in Table 1.

Each one of the multiple roles in the modern concept of doctors is dependent on communication skills. They need these skills to communicate with patients as a medical expert, to approach public/community and governments as an advocate to promote health, to draw attention of students and researchers as a scholar and collaborator, and finally as a manager of a team they need communication skills first and last. The doctor's role and sphere of influence has expanded from patient-alone to community at large. Even in patient-alone approach the goals of good communication skills would include history taking, consultations, obtaining informed consent and breaking bad news; all requiring good communication skills. Thus they need to learn essentials of good communication more than other professionals because patients are humans with sensitive needs. It is impossible to practice medicine with holistic approach without effective communication skills as poor communication would cause a lot of medico-legal and ethical problems.

Table 1. Modern Concept of the Roles of a Doctor:

- Medical expert
- Advocate to promote health
- Scholar
- Collaborator
- Manager
- Communicator

The reality is that doctors are trained to deal with a variety of clinical situations but receive little or no training in communication skills. Therefore their communication skills are predominantly instinctive or merely based on passive learning by observing senior members of the clinical team. Today, a doctor is not

the only source of information. Patients have got access to print and electronic media, governmental and non-governmental organizations, medical societies and patient associations; all giving easy to understand information. With this background comes with no surprise, the increasing evidence that a large number of patients remain unhappy with the quality and quantity of information given, and the manner of its delivery. Patients forget more than half of doctor's clinical recommendations if too much is given too soon. Doctors tend not to involve patients in decision making, and in general, rarely express empathy. The result is that expectations of sizeable number of patients are not met in routine primary care visits as differences in agendas of the doctors and expectations of patients often are not reconciled.

Ineffective communication is an important source of complaints and litigations. In a recent Japanese study 81% of litigation involved insufficient or incorrect explanations by the doctor¹. In 26% of cases poorly delivered information was found to be the reason that prompted individuals to file a malpractice claim². The difference in statistics in the report from 1994² and 2008¹ is because of improvement in general awareness of patients and complexities of modern medicine along with doctors being busier than ever.

Thus formal training for doctors in Communication Skills is essential and would help them

- To acquire knowledge of the basic features of verbal and non-verbal communication
- To learn how to take a medical history from patients and/ or relatives
- To know about illness behavior, physician and patient roles, and relevant cultural beliefs
- To learn how to draw up a plan for an interview, open and close interviews, explain the purpose and summary
- To know how to communicate with patients who have a learning disability
- To gain further experience of doctor-patient communication with different types of patient (e.g. male, female, different social and ethnic groups, school age children and elderly people)
- To learn the basic principles of clinical problem solving.

Improvement in communication skills would not only increase overall efficiency and job satisfaction (improved quality and tension free life) of doctors with consequent reduction in unnecessary litigation but would also enhance patient satisfaction which is the ultimate goal. Enhancement in patient satisfaction would in turn enhance reputation and status of the doctors and their institution in the society. Public representatives and donor agencies would be more than willing to increase financial support of such institutions. Reduction in litigation would also help financial savings for the institutions and doctors. Thus proper training in communication skills would lead to a win-win situation for the patients and their relatives, doctors and health institutions.

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