Short read: Putting the patient at ease - 10 steps to better communication

A physician's office is a busy place, and patients often have to queue up just to see their physician. Time is precious, and apparently time is something which physicians and staff can never have enough of.

"Making the most of this time and communicating well is key," says Matt Eventoff, a communication and messaging strategist and founder of The Oratory Project. "I have worked with many physicians, and many more patients. What I've come to realise is that some basic parameters at the beginning of a visit can make the difference between a great experience and a poor one for both parties."

A common complaint is that a physician often rushes into an examination room, spending more time looking at the patient's chart or with the computer, instead of "interacting" with the patient. As Eventoff points out, a visit isn't just the examination – it starts the minute a patient enters the office area.

He recommends the following steps to help physicians become more effective communicators. These steps are also relevant for all office staff.

1) Refer to the patient by name. Referring to a patient as 'the patient', especially when a loved one is helping to fill out paperwork or attending the visit, can sound cold and clinical. Refer to the patient by name, either first or last, all throughout the visit. It seems like a very small matter, but it means a lot to the person to whom you are speaking.

2) Make eye contact. The patient's chart might be crucial, but the person whose chart you are looking at is more crucial. The patient has often been waiting days, or weeks, and may be very anxious. Eye contact from everyone, from the front desk to the attending nurse to the physician makes a huge difference. And along with eye contact…

3) Smile and say hello. Greet each patient with a smile. If putting the patient at ease is a priority, smiling and saying hello goes a long way.

4) Sit down. Towering over a patient can be physically intimidating. Sitting down makes what can be a distressing experience (again, not knowing what is wrong with you is scary for many patients) a bit less harrowing. It can create warmth and eliminate a barrier.

5) Breathe and listen. Ensure you listen to all the patient has to say before you begin to speak. When it comes to your turn to talk, take a moment to breathe and listen again at intervals, as this will help you to recognise whether the patient understood you or not.

6) Reflect and clarify. Restate the information that was shared to be sure that you got it right and understood correctly. This not only shows interest and respect, it ensures both patient and clinician are on the same page.

7) Ask yourself if the patient appears comfortable. Pay attention to the patient's demeanour, body language as well as their tone of voice and rate of speech. If they appear stressed or fearful then try to calm them. Getting a patient comfortable and relaxed will help that patient open up and share more information, making it easier to get a feel for what might be going on.

8) Consider your tone and rate of speech. As physicians you are dealing with the most sensitive of subjects and information. A slower pace, with a calm, warm tone, and an easy-to-follow pace can go a long way. "I am fortunate to have had physicians who have taken the time to explain things in a calm, clear tone," notes Eventoff. "This is very helpful once a patient has left the office and is thinking back on the conversation."

9) Be clear. Clarity is crucial. Using a term because it is medically correct is the right thing to do, but make sure to explain what that word means in a way that an average person can process and understand. While it's helpful to gain your patient's trust by explaining clearly, it's important to do so without patronising. You will likely get a feel for each individual's level of knowledge and understanding as you communicate and listen, enabling you to respond appropriately.

10) Close communication with interest. Although it may be very difficult to avoid when you're incredibly busy, turning away from your patient to signal it's time to move on to your next patient can put a sour taste on any communicational exchange. After a great visit, it is always nice when a physician smiles, lets you know that you are on the same 'team' and that the patient was not just a number.

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