

COMMUNICATING WITH PATIENTS

Communication is more than talking

The art of communication is growing ever more important for the independent practitioner. Communication skills are not just a nice but fluffy addition to your practice – they can make or break it. **Dr Ali Shakir** (right) shares where he thinks many could improve their techniques



THE INDEPENDENT doctor is facing two major new challenges.

Firstly, medical regulation, registration and assessment are increasingly patient-driven and based on patient experience.

The Care Quality Commission and other medical regulatory bodies are rapidly shifting the emphasis to patient feedback and assurances relating to the handling of all patient issues in their assessment of whether or not to register an independent practice.

Secondly, the increasing emphasis on outcome of medical care means doctors have to improve patient compliance.

Outcome is set to be not only an important measurable factor in the registration of independent practices but also a key element in the competitive opportunities that will arise from GP commissioning, where independent doctors will need to demonstrate both value for money and outcome to have any chance of benefiting from this major change.

These issues share a common solution. That is the ability of the doctor to communicate at an expert level, build rapport with patients and colleagues and employ the right staff.

Of course, we all know that 'communication' is important to patients – but we hear this said so

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frequently that it has lost its meaning.

When was the last time we considered what communication actually means in relation to patient experience?

Doctors, above all other professions, are expected to have the highest levels of communication skill but are given near to no training in that area. They are expected to:

- Be able to make ill patients feel more comfortable;
- Explain difficult medical issues in an understandable way;
- Listen attentively;
- Ask questions in a sensitive way;
- Break bad news;
- Deal with an enormous array of personalities, ages and cultures.

And all this, while restricted by time.

These skills become even more important when the doctor works in private practice and patients have a multitude of other doctors to choose from.

In the case of the independent doctor, the patient's heart and mind has to be won or they will simply go elsewhere. Communication skills are not just a nice but fluffy addition to your practice – they can make or break it.

The patient's perception

When it comes to patient experience, the reality is that most patient complaints have nothing to do with the medical care received. Rather, patient complaints and negative patient experiences are largely due to miscommunication, a lack of communication or feeling out of control or unheard by their doctor or front office staff.

This is partly due to the fact that a patient's perception when unwell and in a vulnerable position is altered to a feeling of being powerless and in someone else's hands.

As one patient expressed recently about an experience with a specialist: 'I didn't feel the doctor was listening to me or taking me seriously. It was like he thought I either lacked intelligence or was somehow making things up'. The doctor in question certainly disagreed. So why the difference in perception?

There are a few key elements of



good communication that, when kept in mind, guarantee improved patient experience, more word-of-mouth referrals and an overall improved patient relationship.

Doctors should note that good communication skills in their front-of-house staff and those who answer their telephones are as important as their own to the patient experience and the image of their practice and that investment in training their staff is equally important. (See feature on page 10).

Take responsibility for delivering the message

Because doctors are knowledgeable professionals and because they are confident that what they say makes sense and is based on scientific knowledge, they often commit a major communication error – they place the responsibility of understanding on the listener.

In other words, their subconscious thinking process is 'I have said something sensible and so if the patient does not understand this, it is their problem. I do not need to do more than tell them what I have already told them'.

But the first rule of good communication is to take responsibility for the delivery of the message.

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Listen to your patient and observe them – are they nodding in agreement or staring at you blankly?

Are they asking relevant questions or is it clear that have not quite got it? Are they fully engaged in the conversation or are they shifting in their seat nervously?

Do not ignore the signs that a patient has fully understood, so ask the right questions to ensure that they have. The right question is not ‘Do you understand?’ because most often, nervous patients will say they have even though they have not.

The right questions are:

- ‘Is there anything about that you would like more detail on?’
- ‘Have I managed to explain this well or would you like me to explain this differently?’
- ‘Would a diagram help my explanation for you?’
- ‘I am happy to answer any more questions’
- ‘Tell me if these are things you already know’.

Build rapport with your patients

Rapport is beyond politeness or being civil. Rapport can only be built by learning how to mirror another person, to understand them, to put yourself in their shoes while ensuring all of your body, your eyes and your voice are engaged with them.

This might sound a big ask of a busy person, but, with training and practice, it will become second nature. The ability to build quick and lasting rapport will not only ensure that your practice is protected against complaints, but will help you achieve patient compliance, word of mouth referrals and moreover, play the greatest role in a positive patient experience.

Research has shown that 80% of our communication is not in the words we say but in our eye movement, body positioning, smiling appropriately, reading personal space and using the right tone of voice. All of these elements in combination are the core of rapport with another person and also at the core of being a good listener.

Echoing your patient’s words, mirroring their position in their seat, their tone of voice and allowing them to define their personal



Improving patient compliance

One issue that affects all doctors is achieving patient compliance. A lack of compliance means that patients make no improvement, causing frustration to both doctor and patient and preventing a positive relationship from developing.

There are a number of reasons why patients do not comply, such as underlying negative beliefs, a lack of understanding of why they should stick to the treatment plan, an inability to visualise the outcome, emotional difficulties, social difficulties and financial difficulties. It is important to take the time to understand the patient’s perspective.

These can be combated by understanding how to ‘coach’ your patient through their treatment plan – why it is important, what the outcome will be, understanding the obstacles to the plan and so on.

Overall, the rapport you build with your patient will remain the determining factor in achieving compliance.

From the perspective of communication, medicine remains the most challenging profession. For the independent doctor, the coming period presents an opportunity to improve the vital skills that will ensure that the business stays strong, practices remain protected, that referrals continue to flow and opportunities in the new healthcare environment open up.

It is normal to be turned off when something is talked about repeatedly by consultants and managers – it can seem like a whole lot of hot air.

But the real meaning of communication in the medical setting is enhanced patient experience – and there is nothing inflated about that. ■

Dr Ali Shakir, a neuro-linguistic programming specialist and master clinical hypnotherapist, practices in Harley Street and founded the Harley Therapy Institute, a training institute for therapists and medical professionals

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space will help them feel relaxed as they recognise the familiar in you, even if you have only just met.

Be a good listener

Being a good listener as a doctor means ensuring that your patient feels heard. This means using the rapport you have built to enhance the communication experience for the patient. It also means being interested in your patient and their life and putting yourself in their shoes.

Eye contact and eye movement are a major indicator of whether or not you are engaged with your patient and all people have the ability to instinctively and sub-consciously read whether or not their partner in communication is focused on them or elsewhere.

So even if your mind is racing with a million and one other considerations, problems or even just thinking through your treatment plan, ensure that your eyes do not give you away and consciously remain engaged visually with your patient.

Listening to the words patients use and noticing their body language and gestures and responding accordingly will help conversation flow and will help ensure that patients feel heard and valued.

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