

Effective Communication Strategies for Improving Health Outcomes

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Abstract- Health Care is both a science and an art. While the science of caring for patients is taught through a structured curriculum, practical sessions, and direct practice, the art such as communicating effectively with patients and other health professionals is often assumed. It usually falls to the innate capability of healthcare providers, with the assumption such skills will improve over time. Communicating effectively in a clinical environment improves the quality of care that patients receive, this article outlines some effective strategies for managing daily communication with patients.

Index Terms- Effective Communication, Clinical Communication, Health Outcomes, Patient Satisfaction

I. INTRODUCTION

Communicating effectively with patients is a core skill that providers of care should have. It is critical not only to convey information, or drive changes in patient behavior, at the systems level sustained and effective communication is very important to making positive changes [1].

Communication can be defined as the transmission of ideas, feelings, and actions from one individual to another through a medium. The modes of communication are divided into two main categories; written and oral/verbal communication. Opportunities for communicating in a clinical environment can be horizontal or vertical. Horizontal communication is when providers of care, be they nurses, dieticians, doctors and any one responsible for delivering care to the patient share information with one another. Examples are when requesting for a procedure, referring a patient, and communicating decisions about the proposed line of care. Vertical communication involves communicating directly with patients or patient families. Opportunities for this form of communication arise for example when taking history from a patient, explaining the investigations that need to be done, explaining a diagnosis or outlining treatment options. Unlike the early years of clinical care, technology has significantly improved where communication occurs amongst providers or between providers and patients. Nowadays, it is common for some clinical communication to occur via email, phone or video conferencing. The same rules guiding communicating effectively when face to face also largely apply when information is transmitted through an electronic medium.

Although it is rarely thought of in that sense, communication is also a way for patients to assess the knowledge and competence of providers of care, especially during physical interactions [2]. The way a provider communicates can be a yardstick that the patient uses to judge how competent he or she

thinks the care provider is, and will go a long way in gaining their confidence and making them comfortable enough to volunteer information or ask questions that are top of mind for them. In this regard, healthcare providers should not neglect the nonverbal signals- such as eye contact, smiling, maintaining a professional and warm posture, and using meaningful hand movements – that they project at the expense of verbal communication.

II. COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Firstly, understanding the audience for which the communication is intended is important as this should determine the style, language, and sometimes content of what is being communicated. Certain patient demographic differences may influence expectations about communication and their perception of what is being communicated. Being aware of this and the dynamics surrounding the patient and/or family will help to make conversations fluid and tailored. Also, certain hospital workers can better connect with particular patients, either because they have similar background as the patient, they have dealt with similar patient situations in the past, or they themselves have had to personally deal with the situation currently facing the patient [3]. Where appropriate, their help should be solicited.

Secondly, communication should be carried out in a systematic and structured way. When conveying information, the main ideas should be communicated first, followed by supporting facts or opinion. Critical information should be conveyed slowly and deliberately, and when presenting a list itemizing them aids recall. Keeping the conversation structured and simple will improve clarity and comprehension as well as limit emotional distress in the often high stress environment where patients receive care [4].

Lastly, evaluate whether communication has achieved its intended purpose by checking for understanding from the patient. Watch for nonverbal clues such as facial expressions and body posture, listen actively, answer their questions, and asking probing questions to get to the root of their concerns. This reinforces the message being passed across and gives the health care provider another opportunity to clarify points that may not have been clear.

III. CONCLUSION

Communicating effectively with patients improves patient satisfaction, in addition to helping the healthcare provider promote patient adherence to treatment, and diagnosis of patient condition while reducing malpractice risk [5]. It is therefore

important that adequate training be made available to healthcare professionals to aid their understanding of the core principles for communicating effectively and provide opportunities for them to practice effective communication skills. It is an art form that can be taught and improved upon, regardless of the current skill level of the participants. Besides from the obvious reason of improving clinical diagnosis and treatment of patient conditions, it helps to improve the overall quality and satisfaction that patients derive when they access health care.

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