

WHAT PATIENTS AND FAMILIES WANT PHYSICIANS TO KNOW

Communication

Communicating effectively is a critical aspect of medical practice. Things you can say to facilitate communication and create rapport:

- “What do you think is going on?”
- “What questions do you have?” –PAUSE-- “I have time.” –PAUSE—

Listening, in and of itself, is an intervention that improves patient care and outcomes. Listening is not just about being polite/socially appropriate. Ask yourself: “Am I listening or waiting to speak?”

Patients and families who are sick or injured are often in crisis. Illness and hospitalization may be traumatic. People may process information poorly under duress, in unfamiliar surroundings, etc. Say, “It’s very likely you will not remember much of what I say. Please ask as many questions as you need to now and later.”

When you introduce yourself, say your name, your role and explain what your role means in the context of the care team. Most patients and families need help understanding the hierarchy and complicated network of care team members in a teaching hospital.

Pay attention when patients, families and visitors introduce themselves. Who is the patient advocate? Don’t assume because someone is in the room that they are the patient advocate. Ask if there are other people who should be present. Family members may be out of the room when you arrive. Be prepared to wait until they are present.

Take time to get to know families and patients. Sit down. Make eye contact. Take a deep breath. Be present. Put your phone away. Pay attention to body language – yours, the patients’, and family members’.

Talk directly to patients – including children and teens. Be aware of patients’ developmental maturity. Small children can understand words but may not have appropriate context so be careful what you say. Teenagers are savvy. Treat them with respect.

Ask for help delivering information when you need it. You may not always be the best person to share information. Patients and families can tell when you are nervous, unsure, etc. If others on your team are better at communicating, have them communicate difficult or complex information. Pay attention to what they say and how they communicate so you can get better at communicating.

Empathy

Empathy is feeling with people. Empathy involves connecting to others in a vulnerable way. Don’t say “I understand” unless you really do. Empathy involves taking another’s perspective, staying out of judgment, recognizing emotions in other people and communicating that. The RSA short video “[The Power of Empathy](#)” is an excellent reminder of how empathy works.

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Awareness

Be aware of patients' and families' strengths and challenges. Take resources into consideration: transportation, health insurance, caregiving capacity, education level, etc. Find out about patients' literacy, socioeconomic status, culture, sexual orientation/gender identify, ethnicity, language.

Empowerment

Patients and families are part of the care team. It's their right to participate in care. You may need to invite them to participate in rounds and decisions as they may not realize they can. Communicate with them the same way you do with professional care team members. Create opportunities for patients and families to participate in care by teaching and consciously partnering.

Professionalism

Treat all members of the team – patients, families, and staff -- with respect. How you communicate is as important as what you communicate. If you are in conflict with a team member, maintain a professional demeanor even if you haven't had a chance to resolve the conflict.

Read the patient's history, nursing assessment, etc. before you go talk to the patient. Ask clarifying questions as needed. Patients may assume that all care team members are aware of what they have communicated to one care team member.

Respect

Respect patients' and families' preferences and decisions. Assume patients and families have information and knowledge you may not. Honor patients' and families' decisions to refuse treatment. Support patients and families in seeking information until they are comfortable making a decision.

Vulnerability/Humility

It's always okay to say "I don't know. I will find out and get back to you." It's always okay to keep asking questions if you don't understand or feel satisfied that you have all the information you need.

You may have been conditioned to think that asking questions makes you appear unknowledgeable or weak. Anthropologist Deborah Tanner tells about a practicing physician who, upon receiving a negative performance evaluation, questioned her supervisor for an explanation. He said she knew less than her peers. She asked how he reached that conclusion. He said, "You ask more questions."