



Letter to the Editor

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The significance of effective physician-patient communication to positive treatment outcomes

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Dear Editor,

Communication is globally agreed to promote good interpersonal relationships. In the business world, good interpersonal relationship between the boss and his subordinates promotes productivity and company's efficiency. In the 'Pygmalion Theory', it is confirmed that communication promotes subordinates performances¹. Generally, successful relationships in all human endeavors can be enhanced by communication². Studies have shown that there are strong relationships between physicians-patient communication and the outcome of care. This is because doctor-patient communication does not only work on the psychological stability of the patient necessary for better treatment outcome; it also helps to reduce treatment errors from both parties³.

Today's medical world tends towards the patient-centered medical practice. The fulcrum of which is the satisfaction of the patient at the end of care. It is not only restoration of health that brings about patient satisfaction. Other factors such as meeting patient's expectations, continuity of care and physician-patient communication have been

proved to play key role in patient satisfaction phenomenon⁴. Even 65% of patients that could not fully regain their functional status professed satisfaction with the outcome of their care because of the vital role of interpersonal relationship built by doctor-patient communication⁴. Adequate physician-patient communication has been proved to promote emotional stability of patient which is essential for the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions⁴. Moreover, it promotes patients involvements in the treatment decisions as well as foster their understanding of the ailments and the expectations from the treatment intervention¹. This prepares them better psychologically for the treatment and makes them to be positive in their treatment outcomes expectations. This positive expectation most often results in positive manifestation¹.

According to Ha and Longnecker, patient-physician communication results in pleasant interpersonal relationship, promotes smooth exchange of important information and enhances patients' participation in the treatment decision making process³. These deliverables of good patient-physician communication are vital to building trust and

securing the commitment and cooperation of the patients as well as their adherence to treatment instructions³. There are however several accounts where rather than having a positive outcome, physician-patient communications have resulted in very ugly outcomes such as worsened medical condition as well as suicides and deaths³. This is because good communication is a skill that must consciously be acquired and unfortunately, the medical world and training only emphasized on technical competence at the expense of communication competence. Even those physicians who attach importance to communication often overestimate their communication competence³. According to the studies done by Tongue *et al*, while about 75% of doctors judged themselves excellent in communication, only 21% of their patients agreed to their claim⁵.

The reality is that all physicians communicate with their patients one way or the other but the percentage of such communication that results in positive treatment outcomes and patient's satisfaction may be a negligible and insignificant fraction of the whole^{3,5}. Greville-Harris has suggested that poor doctor-patient communication could worsen the health condition of patients⁶. What is missing is the effectiveness of such communication. Unfortunately, most physicians with unwholesome communication skills do not believe that they are poor communicators³. This gap may not be unconnected with the training model of the physicians. The emphasis of the training is on acquiring technical competence necessary to diagnose and treat ailments. Fraternizing with patients for the purpose of building friendship and rapport is not a priority. Whereas, man is a social being! This much ignored aspect has

been found to have immense contribution to successful treatment outcomes and patients satisfaction. Other consequences of poor physician-patient communication are malpractice suits, increased medical errors, poor adherence to medical instructions, poor patients' retention, dimmed public image, increased request for referrals, loss of reputation as well as loss of revenue with its ugly repercussions^{3,5}.

In view of this, the world has come to the reality that not just communication is needed to bring about a positive health outcome but an effective communication. In the submission of the ACOG, successful patient-physician relationship is dependent on the capacity of physicians to effectually and zealously communicate with their patients⁷. According to them, the need to acquire excellent communication competence by physicians is becoming more imminent in view of the increasing necessity to spend less time with patients while achieving greater clinical productivity.

This challenge is more pronounced in Africa where there is a huge gap between the globally acceptable physician-patient population ratio and the reality. The few available physicians are overwhelmed with the burden of work which must not only be done but done well as anything short of this may have very disastrous consequences. Overwhelming patient loads, as well as ethical and legal consideration have been fingered as major culprits of poor physician-patient communication².

Efforts should be made such other factors or attitude does not impede effective communication especially, in this critical sector

where failure is not an option considering its lethal consequences. All barriers to effective physician-patient communication must be successfully mitigated. Training curriculum for physicians should be reviewed to include more emphasis on communication competence above technical skills.

Thank you.

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