



Taking Time to Communicate: Skills Residents Need Now

Editor's Note: One of the six general competency areas medical residents at USF are required to obtain is interpersonal and communication skills that result in effective information exchange and teaming with patients, their families, and other health professionals. With that in mind, the next few issues of the RAP newsletter will address communication topics.

Some of us are born with the ability to establish instant rapport with others, and some of us need to work at developing those skills. Many doctors go into the profession because they have a desire to work with patients, but find their medical education focuses more on the technical and not the human aspects of the job.

"Today's doctors do have more opportunities while in medical school and residency programs to learn communications skills than previous generations did," observes Houston, Texas author and consultant Vickie Alleman. "But young doctors sometimes don't start out with a solid understanding of how interpersonal communication skills relate directly to the health of their patients."

Alleman has worked with physicians for more than 20 years. Her book "Business Therapy for Doctors: Communications Skills for the

21st Century" was published last year.

"The number one arena where a doctor's communication skills affect patients is in the area of compliance," Alleman says. "There are studies that show this, and I have noticed it in my consulting work with doctors. When a patient feels they are listened to and can communicate their concerns to their physician, the likelihood that they will actually follow that doctor's advice greatly increases."

The ability to communicate effectively can also translate tangibly into fewer liability claims, says Alleman. "Patients whose doctors communicate well and often are less likely to sue."

Another benefit is that doctors who are good communicators seem to enjoy a better quality of life, Alleman observes. "The physicians who really work on communication and interpersonal skills are much happier in their practice over the

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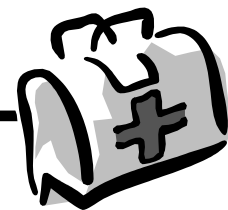
Developing communication skills takes time and practice. But poor communication skills can sabotage your career. Did you know that your Resident Assistance Program provides not only counseling but coaching to help you become a more successful physician? Call the Resident Assistance Program Hotline (RAP), 813-870-3344.

long term. Those who value interpersonal skills tend to have stronger relationships, tend to be more resilient and have a better ability to deal with inevitable changes in the health care environment."

Trust is Essential

"When you take time to establish trust at the very beginning, that sets the stage for a good working relationship with a patient," says Ned Claxton,

Continued on next page



Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around.

-Leo Buscaglia



Money Matters

Are You in on the Lower-Debt Trend?

By reducing debt and increasing your savings, you can prepare your personal balance sheet for many years to come.

If you are already putting down your credit card and picking up a passbook, you are part of a growing trend. After ratcheting up debt to record levels in recent years, Americans cut their credit-card debt by \$8.4 billion in December 2002, the largest monthly decline since record-keeping began in 1968. And it wasn't an anomaly.

Credit-card debt rose just 1.6 percent in 2002, compared with 5 percent in 2001 and 11.5 percent in 2000. Meanwhile, the savings rate began to climb after falling to below 1 percent in the fourth quarter of 2001, reports the Wall Street Journal.

Low interest rates are certainly contributing to the debt decline. Smart consumers are refinancing their mortgages and shifting to zero-interest auto loans. That frees up cash that can be used to pay down personal debt. The prevalence of zero-percent introductory rates on credit cards is also helping people make faster repayment.

If you haven't already taken advantage of low interest rates, it's not too late.

If you'd like help on how to put together a plan that will reduce your debt and increase your savings, contact *Julio Muniz* or *Kim Fults* at **Muniz and Associates**, 813-258-0033. www.munizandassociates.com

Taking Time to Communicate, *continued*

M.D. family practice residency director at Central Maine Medical Center in Lewiston. "That will let you have access to more information that can help you understand what else may be going on in a patient's life. The more clues you can gather about your patient's social and emotional circumstances, beyond just their physical complaint, the more complete the overall picture will be."

One example of information a patient might share only if a doctor has first established trust is whether they are gay or lesbian, says Claxton. "This is important for you to know as you go about trying to help them with health issues. But if a patient doesn't feel comfortable sharing that with you, you'll miss a lot of information that's needed to adequately manage their care."

"To establish rapport, ask open-ended questions, give patients time to explain, and then listen attentively," says Claxton. "Even when doctors are under constant pressure to see more patients, it doesn't take that long to do this. There's evidence that shows that if you're good at soliciting information from a patient at the start of your visit, you can be more efficient. You'll get to the heart of the problem faster than you will without that preamble."

Resources:

-*Business Therapy for Doctors: Communications Skills for the 21st Century*, www.allemancommunications.com

-*Talking with Patients: Keys to Good Communication*, Philip R. Myerscough and Michael Ford. University Press, New York, NY, 1996.

-Toastmasters International, <http://toastmasters.org/> (speaking and communication skills development)

Antidotes for Compassion Fatigue

Making a conscious effort to replenish your personal energy supply will help you remain more resilient, even in the face of compassion fatigue or "vicarious trauma," one of the occupational hazards of being a physician. Unlike people with burnout, who typically cope by detaching, people who experience compassion fatigue keep giving. The challenge is to turn that giving inward.

- Know your own triggers and vulnerable areas; learn to defuse or avoid them.
- Resolve your own personal issues and continue to monitor your own reactions to others' pain.
- Develop realistic expectations about the rewards as well as limitations of your profession.
- Find opportunities to acknowledge, express and work through your experiences in a supportive environment.
- Develop and reward your sense of humor.
- Eat nutritious food, exercise, rest, meditate or pray, and take care of your whole self.

Excerpted from "Survival Strategies for Caregivers," Association of Traumatic Stress Specialists, www.atss-hq.com, Created by Carol Hacker, PhD, CTS, Lutheran Disaster Services; Jayne Crisp, CTS, CVAS, ATSS, Prison Fellowship Ministries & International Critical Incident Stress Foundation