HIGH STAKES: THE RISKS OF POOR PATIENT-PROVIDER COMMUNICATION

INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE

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HOW DOES PROVIDER COMMUNICATION IMPACT CARE?

Literacy challenges, healthcare jargon, fast-paced healthcare encounters, and a host of other issues make it imperative that caregivers become better communicators and narrators of patient care.

They flush IVs, draw labs, and deliver medications quickly and efficiently. So much of what healthcare providers do and the way they speak is second nature. Yet, outside of their professional circle, patients and families don’t always understand what they are saying and doing. Despite the American Medical Association’s (AMA, 2007) push for laymen’s terminology and improved communication strategies, a wide communication gap exists between providers and patients.

Communicating clearly with patients is critical. What a healthcare provider says and how he or she says it has a direct impact on the patient, his or her family, and ultimately, his or her behaviors. Poor communication can increase medical errors and hospital readmission rates for patients with chronic diseases such as congestive heart failure and diabetes as well as lead to misuse of medications.

While it is true that healthcare is awash in a sea of acronyms and complex language, healthcare providers also need to understand the bigger picture: There are a host of other reasons why patients don’t always understand what they are saying. Low health literacy levels, differences in culture and ethnicity, and socioeconomic status all play a role in how well a patient understands the care he or she is receiving. Moreover, add in the productivity driven world of healthcare, such as a busy emergency department or a bustling doctor’s office, and it can be a challenge to ensure that patients and their family members are able to understand clearly what the healthcare worker is trying to teach or explain to them.

As members of the healthcare team, it is imperative that we recognize this immense gap in understanding for many of the patients and families we encounter on a daily basis. How do you close gaps in understanding and make it a cultural norm to communicate effectively with every patient, every time? It starts with asking the question, “What can I do or say differently to ensure my patient fully understands the care they are receiving?” Here are four strategies for bridging communication gaps and improving each patient’s understanding of their care.

I. TEACH PROVIDERS HOW TO NARRATE PATIENT CARE

Interpersonal communication is at the heart of a successful medical intervention. The use of consistent and proper word choice when interacting with patients and their relatives is essential to provide a pleasant experience and achieve a successful outcome. Yet, successful interpersonal communication is an often-overlooked ingredient in patient care. Typically, healthcare providers are compelled to do things at a swift pace because they are caring for a high volume of patients, and because they are trained to be as efficient as possible. They use unfamiliar terminology, and as a result, patients often have a difficult time understanding the “why” behind care processes.

A strong communications workforce development plan teaches providers how to narrate their care to patients from a variety of backgrounds and across multiple healthcare settings and situations. Narrating your care or your work is simply explaining what you will be doing and why. Because we do the same procedures and processes every day, we often assume that the person we are helping knows what we are doing and why. We may assume that someone else has told the person all about what will take place. But, according to a Forbes article (Llopis, 2013), humans generally listen at a 25% comprehension rate. Even if the person has heard the explanation before, repeating the explanation reinforces the message.

RELATE℠: Meaningful Communication with Every Patient, Every Family, Every Time

RELATE is one of the most celebrated and recognized models of communication within healthcare today. RELATE is an acronym for the recommended method of all personal interactions within healthcare. RELATE stands for:

• Reassure
• Explain
• Listen
• Answer
• Take Action
• Express Appreciation

HealthStream Industry Perspective: High Stakes: The Risks of Poor Patient-Provider Communication
Tell them “why.”

Narrating patient care starts with using clear and understandable terms. When we are explaining what we will be doing, the most important part of the message should be the “why.” Stating the “why” many times can increase patient understanding and compliance. For example, when the caregiver is doing something as simple as closing the door to a patient’s room, they should take a moment and explain that the reason he or she is closing the door at night is to block out the noise so the patient can sleep through the night. Or, at registration, communicate that you are double-checking the person’s information for their safety and in order to match the patient with the correct procedure.

Example of how to narrate the care process:

“I know that you have answered these questions before, but for your safety, I will ask them again. This ensures we all know important information about you. Next, I will confirm that your IV is flushed before administering your meds. What I need to do is… It shouldn’t any longer than 2-3 minutes. Then, I will administer your medications.”

As you are taking action or doing a procedure, continue to “narrate your care or process” by explaining what you are doing and why. At the conclusion, be sure to inform the patient or customer of the next steps including a timeframe if appropriate.

Manage expectations.

When you are explaining what you will be doing and why, there is an opportunity to manage expectations. Take a moment to explain how long the procedure or process will take or how long the patient will need to wait for results so that he or she has realistic expectations. It is best to under promise and over deliver. If things are taking longer than the patient or customer expects, he or she may think it is because of bad news. Setting the correct expectation can relieve the patient’s or the customer’s anxiety.

Engage in active listening skills.

Listen and encourage the patient to ask questions and express any concerns. In many situations and especially in healthcare, it is often hard for a layperson to ask questions. They worry that the question he or she wants to ask may be a stupid question, and he or she does not want to reveal ignorance. A great way to encourage questions is to ask an open-ended question such as “What questions do you have?” instead of “Do you have any questions?”

After the patient or customer asks a question or expresses a concern, use active listening to make sure you understand what is being said. For example: “What questions do you have?” Patient expresses concern that the medication might make him or her sick. “Your concerns are perfectly understandable and quite common. What do you mean when you say…? Have you been sick when on this medication before?”

According to the same Forbes article (Llopis, 2013), we spend 45% of a typical business day listening, yet less than 2% of professionals have had education or formal learning to improve listening skills. Keep these communication techniques in mind when it comes to active listening.

Active Listening Tips:

- Concentrate on what is being said, not how you will respond.
- Stay at eye level and maintain eye contact. Sit down if possible.
- Empathize with feelings—use touch where appropriate.
- Avoid interrupting, finishing sentences, or assuming you know what the person is going to say.
- Ask clarifying questions.
- Pay close attention to body language.
- Summarize what the patient said.
- Answer questions and address concerns.
- Check for understanding and if appropriate ask the patient to teach back to you.

Using Words That Work℠ with Every Patient, Every Family, Every Time

Patients relate the quality of care they receive at a hospital to their overall “perceptions” and “experiences.” Their entire experience is driven by the level of positive interpersonal interaction at every touch point during their hospitalization.

Words That Work courseware discusses how nurses and other healthcare providers can reframe their communication for a positive impact on patient experience and satisfaction.
2. REASSURE AND ALLEVIATE FEARS

Fear is a major driver in communications gaps that occur in the healthcare world today. Patients can experience fear, anxiety, and negative emotions in the healthcare setting for a number of reasons, including those related to culture, religion, and healthcare literacy levels. Anybody who's entering the healthcare system, whether in a doctor's office, an ED, or an ambulatory center, likely is dealing with fear or distracting thoughts, which will impede his or her ability to understand what a provider is saying. He or she may be thinking, “Am I going to die?” or “Am I going to get home in time to feed my kids?” We want to alleviate any negative emotions that our patients and customers bring with them. These negative emotions can actually slow down the healing process.

Effective provider-patient communication includes the ability to alleviate a person's fear and anxieties that come up during a healthcare encounter through reassuring words and behaviors. So the first thing we need to do for our patients and customers is alleviate their emotions by reassuring them we are going to take great care of them or help them with their issue. From the start of the visit to the end, there are several steps you can take to reassure patients, including introducing yourself with your name, title, and experience; projecting a professional image; and speaking positively about the healthcare team, other departments, and the organization. Even if we are dealing with a patient or a customer over the phone, we should give him or her our undivided attention. They can hear that smile in your voice.

For example:

“Good morning, Mr. Jones. I’m Dr. Wright, your anesthesiologist. I have been with [enter hospital name] for 17 years. Dr. Baker will be conducting your surgery this morning. He is one of the best surgeons in his field. The team and I work with him often, and we are all committed to taking excellent care of you.”

Avoid Using Medical Jargon

Another communications challenge for patients can be the overuse of acronyms and medical jargon. Every profession and department has a language that is specific to that profession or department. Overtime, acronyms such as CHF, HAI, or different words for the same department, (for example Radiology, X-ray, or Imaging) become second nature to us, and we use them without even thinking. When we are explaining something to a patient or customer, we need to make sure we use terms that the receiver can understand. Be careful not to use acronyms or very technical language. This is important in spoken conversation, as well as written communication and signage.

Five Ways to Reassure Patients

1. Project a professional image and introduce yourself by name, title, and tenure.
2. Seek and maintain eye contact; and offer a smile and a handshake or touch on the shoulder to make a personal and human connection.
3. Acknowledge patient by name, asking, “How would you like me to address you?”
4. Greet everyone in the room or bay.
5. Offer words of encouragement and praise about your team and your department or service to promote their confidence in you.
3. ADDRESS CULTURAL FACTORS

A frail, elderly gentleman from Ghana tells his son who is visiting him in a large urban hospital in Texas, “I think the people in this hospital are afraid of me.” He asks, “What makes you say that dad?” His father replies, “Every time someone comes near me they put on gloves.” While the importance of gloves is obvious to the healthcare worker, it often doesn’t occur to the provider to explain during a visit or procedure that all staff members wear gloves with every patient, every time as a universal precaution to keep patients safe from infection.

As we learn new ways to better narrate patient care, cultural issues may impact a patient’s ability to understand what we are saying. Cultural diversity is more than just differences in where we are from. There is diversity in language, physical appearance, and in literacy that leave gaps in understanding for both patients and providers. In fact, only 12% of English-speaking Americans are healthcare literate, meaning they are able to understand instructions and explanations of care, medications and treatment, according to the United Health Foundation and the Department of Education (IOM, 2007, 2012).

Other cultural differences such as ethnicity and socioeconomic status may also cause patients to not understand or be fearful of the care they are receiving. Studies have shown (Sweeney, 2012; Health Pulse of America Center for Survey Research, 2011) that 96% of people entering a hospital setting experience fear.

Cultural issues go both ways. For example, foreign-born physicians can experience communication barriers when they treat people who have not been exposed to people from different countries. The barrier often shows up when it comes to building confidence and trust because the patient doesn’t understand a foreign accent. In these situations, it is important to coach foreign-born physicians to make an extra effort to establish rapport first with the patient. Sit down and share pictures of children or grandchildren or talk about the area in which they live. Find a personal connection so that people can overcome the barrier of, “I don’t understand your accent or where you’re from.”

Or, it may be an orthodox Jew from Rockland County, New York, whose religion prevents men and women from touching one another. In this situation respect is essential. Start by reassuring the patient and explaining what you’re going to do. If it’s going to be important that the female provider check the patient’s urine output every hour, which involves touching the catheter, then it is important for the two to share expectations early on and come up with a plan that will work for both. Ultimately, providers must own the process, and be aware and proactive about doing things differently.

Express Surveys: Focus Your Efforts on the Drivers that Will Improve Patient Experience Outcomes

Our Express Surveys are census-based survey products that allow you to let the voices of your customers guide performance improvement efforts. Your patients will be able to evaluate their experience in near real-time following their visits and your staff will better understand how to improve outcomes quickly and sustainably. Focus first on patient experience.

- Collect data on only the most important issues
- Improve the rate at which responses are received
- Each question is backed by learning and development courses to teach clinicians how to confidently deliver an exceptional experience
- Use the data collected to make decisions and improve faster
- Survey all patients rather than only a small sample

**Breakthrough Cultural Competence for Healthcare**

Dramatic changes are happening in the healthcare industry. This course introduces non-clinical healthcare professionals to a set of skills that will help them adapt to these changes and thrive in their careers. Four interactive modules cover the following:

1. Changes in the healthcare industry and the increased need for cultural competence
2. The mindset for accelerating one’s career development
3. Trust-building and teamwork techniques
4. Skills for effective communication with patients and colleagues
5. Improve to “always.”
There is a joke in healthcare that a person can have a Ph.D. and still not understand what he or she needs to do when returning home from the doctor’s office or the hospital. Care instructions can be complex no matter how well they are written or spoken and regardless of the patient’s education level. And as stated before, fear, healthcare literacy, and culture also play key roles in determining how well a person will understand and follow through with discharge instructions.

In the past, discharge instructions typically consisted of healthcare providers handing patients a slip of paper with instructions and a phone number to call if there were any issues. However, savvy healthcare organizations today understand that this is only step one in the discharge process. For all of the reasons stated before, it’s critical to communicate discharge and follow-up processes multiple times and in multiple ways to patients. Ask probing questions to see if patients understand what you are saying. Ask them to teach back the same instructions. It could be as simple as having the patient repeat, “I am supposed to drink 8 ounces of water when I take this medicine,” or “I will need to change this bandage twice a day.”

There is also tremendous value in having a discharge phone call process. Because so much is happening when a patient is leaving the hospital, establish that there will be a 24-hour follow-up call for each patient. Let the patient know that someone will be calling the next day when he or she has had time to settle into a home routine. A caregiver will then close the care loop by calling the patient at home to answer questions and discuss medication dosages and side effects. For example, “Okay, now that you’re home, let’s go over your discharge instructions and make sure you understand next steps and what to look for. Let’s also make sure you understand your medications and their side effects.”

Avoid the Risks of Poor Communication

In order to keep people healthier and their care better managed, we’ve got to do a better job of making sure we’re communicating clearly. Communication gaps can impact multiple areas including patient safety, patient outcomes, and the patient experience, as well as the bottom line. Patients who don’t understand their providers are less likely to be compliant with care and medication instructions, thus increasing the likelihood of a hospital readmission or a trip to the emergency room. With one out of three hospital admissions due to healthcare-associated infections, we have to make it a priority to say, “For your safety, I’m washing my hands. For your safety, I’m checking your IV band.” We must narrate our care, reassure our patients, and explain to people in simple, consistent language why we’re doing what we’re doing. If we want to improve patient outcomes, we must embed new communication processes into the culture. All cultural changes begin and end with each person on the team recognizing that “nothing will change, until I change.”
About the Authors

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With nearly 35 years of healthcare experience, Bette Harriman works with client hospitals across the United States to improve service delivery and operational protocols. She was integral in transforming Baptist Hospital in Pensacola, Florida from a local, struggling organization to an industry leader and best practice-focused organization and brings that day-to-day knowledge to each client engagement. Her insights into organizational collaboration, service excellence standards of performance, and meaningful measurement have helped her clients achieve cultural excellence.

During Baptist Health Care’s journey to patient-centered excellence, Ms. Harriman held several key roles including Director of Membership Services and Team Leader of the hospital’s first patient satisfaction measurement team. She last served as Director of the neuroscience service line where she had direct responsibility for the growth in contribution margin, patient satisfaction, physician recruitment, alignment and engagement. She has also been named a Baptist Health Care Legend, the highest level of recognition for employee service, for her volunteer work with the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

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Kathleen Lynam brings extensive clinical, operational, and executive-level experience with healthcare organizations of all sizes to her role as Coach. Ms. Lynam has provided coaching ranging from large healthcare systems in the southeast to urban hospitals in the Bronx and Queens, New York to small community hospitals across the country. She thrives on developing strong relationships with executives, physicians, leaders, and frontline staff and has helped healthcare providers across the nation learn how to make changes to create a patient-centered culture.

Ms. Lynam was previously Vice President for Empath Consulting, where she coached and mentored members of senior leadership teams, directors, managers, and staff in adopting and implementing new processes to drive patient satisfaction scores. She has also served as the Vice President of Patient Care Services and Chief Nurse Executive at Good Samaritan Hospital in Suffern, New York, where she introduced enterprise-wide programs resulting in excellence in quality and customer service awards.

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REFERENCES CITED:


