

Effective Doctor-Patient Communication— A Hit or a Myth?

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My credentials for writing this article and *The 20 Suggestions* referenced herein include many years as a patient, 29 years as a psychology professor, and over 30 years as a clinical psychologist working part-time within the medical establishment.

As a psychologist, I've long been interested in the basic communication skills of physicians. On a personal level, I've been very impressed by the ability of my many physicians to communicate their concerns and a great deal of complex information during the course of very brief consultations.

Is my positive view regarding the communicative capabilities of physicians shared by other patients? Hopefully, yes; but maybe not. It's possible that many patients have developed some unique and unrealistic notions regarding their illnesses and what to expect from their doctors. TV dramas, newspaper columns, advertisements, folklore, breaking news, and talks with other patients are among their influences. Patients may expect their

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physicians to be omniscient, omnipotent, compassion-compounded, and available 24/7. But in the real world of medicine, such persons are rare; and such unrealistic expectations could lead to routine disap-

The 20 Suggestions (available online at http://www.wisconsinmedicalsociety.org/_WMS/publications/wmj/issues/wmj_v111n2/111no2_20questions.pdf) can serve as a helpful resource for such an under-

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pointment for the patient and further complicate communication between the physician and patient.

Despite obstacles, most physicians probably believe they're good communicators. That might well be accurate, but there's always room for improvement. And a quest for such improvement can be an interesting and challenging project.

If a physician accepts this challenge, how should he or she go about it? A systematic inventory of one's communication skills is a good start. Amid their strengths, most physicians can find a few habits that could and should be modified or even eliminated. Perhaps a mere "tweaking" of one's communication skills is a responsible and reassuring first step.

Developed specially for physicians,

taking. Each suggestion contains definitions, examples, and a format for change. Physicians seeking to improve their communication skills can first compare their behavior with those listed on this standard. Then, progressing in the spirit of the old song, they can "accentuate the positive" behaviors while "eliminating the negative" ones en route to personal and professional improvement. Such changes require both time and thought for their implementation.

While physicians are the focus for these suggestions, with slight modifications this approach could be employed by other health care professionals as well.

Ultimately, the usefulness of *The 20 Suggestions* will be determined by the experience of physicians and other professionals who are willing to try them out.

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