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## Mastering Communication: Key Strategies for Trainee Physicians to Enhance Patient Care

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It is no secret that effective communication is essential for quality patient care. It not only encourages collaboration among health care professionals and leads to more efficient care, error reduction, and well-informed team participation in treatment, it also helps establish trust between patients and their clinician.

However, due to their dual roles as learners and caregivers, trainee physicians can face distinct communication hurdles. Navigating the clinical setting involves interacting with myriad health care professionals with differing areas and levels of expertise. Trainees also must manage emotional and practical communication obstacles with patients and their families, frequently in high-pressure situations. Striking a balance between competence and approachability demands a profound grasp of both medical knowledge and interpersonal skills. Thus, mastering the following qualities and skills will help ensure successful communication with patients and colleagues.

### Clarity and Transparency

George Bernard Shaw said the main issue in communication is the mistaken belief that it has occurred. Indeed, clarity and transpar-

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ency are essential, especially in medical settings where effective communication—or a lack thereof—can significantly impact patient care.

Clinicians must convey medical information in a way that patients can easily understand. This includes using simple language, avoiding

medical jargon with patients, and providing specific, concise instructions to both patients and colleagues to avoid any confusion. Being transparent involves sharing comprehensive information about treatment options, risks, and uncertainties, and also includes seeking advice from experienced colleagues when needed. Communicating with clarity and transparency will help empower patients to make informed decisions about their care while building their trust, and it fosters a supportive health care environment where learning is continuous.

### Understanding Nonverbal Cues

Nonverbal cues are an integral part of communication, especially in the medical field. Clinicians can use them to convey empathy (see below), attentiveness, and confidence. At

the same time, patients' nonverbal clues, such as avoiding eye contact or slumped posture, can reveal valuable information about their emotional well-being. By acknowledging and responding to patients' nonverbal signals, clinicians can enhance patient care and improve

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communication—ultimately creating an environment conducive for healing.

### Empathy and Active Listening

“The simplest and most powerful method to establish a connection with another individual is to listen. Just listen. Maybe the most crucial thing we ever offer each other is our attention,” writes Rachel Naomi Reme.

Showing empathy toward patients—listening, understanding, being aware of, and being sensitive to their thoughts, feelings, and experiences helps reduce their stress and anxiety, and—as demonstrated in various studies—it is crucial for improved health outcomes and patient satisfaction.<sup>1</sup> Showing empathy also helps create a stronger bond between the patient and the clinician, resulting in quicker

recovery, increased independence, and reduced need for intensive care.<sup>2,3</sup> Establishing an environment where patients feel heard and understood can significantly improve their adherence to medical advice.

Unfortunately, in today's fast-paced clinical environment, demonstrating empathy is not always intuitive. According to Stephen R. Covey, "Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply." Trainee physicians can easily fall into this pattern. Ideally, training programs that incorporate scenarios or role-playing exercises can assist in honing trainee physicians' communication skills, including empathy. Deliberate practice and mindfulness also can help.

Empathy requires active listening—being fully present, maintaining eye contact, interpreting nonverbal signals, acknowledging emotions, and offering feedback to confirm or clarify information. Proficiency in this skill allows clinicians to collect accurate patient histories, identify unspoken concerns, and tailor treatments accordingly. Moreover, it promotes a collaborative atmosphere where feedback from peers and mentors can be utilized effectively to improve practice and patient results.

### Respect and Cultural Sensitivity

Closely related to empathy are respect and cultural sensitivity. Demonstrating these qualities to patients, colleagues, and other staff alike is vital for creating a positive clinical environment and building trust and professionalism in medical practice—especially in the diverse landscape of modern health care.

Showing respect goes beyond being polite. Like empathy, it involves active listening, valuing input, and having dialogues that foster understanding and collaboration. It also includes being sensitive to nonverbal cues and responding well to feedback. For trainee physicians, communicating respectfully with the entire health care team can improve teamwork and help navigate health care complexities, contributing positively to their work environment and upholding integrity and trust in medical practice.

Embracing cultural sensitivity helps clinicians address social and cultural factors affecting the delivery of patient-centered care. This means understanding and respecting cultural differences influencing patient values, beliefs,

and behaviors and integrating this awareness into every interaction to ensure appropriate and respectful medical advice and treatments. By doing so, clinicians can build rapport with patients from various backgrounds and foster inclusivity to enhance patient compliance and satisfaction.

Cultural sensitivity is also important in interactions among health care professionals. Trainees who value diverse perspectives can improve team dynamics and patient care collaboration. This sensitivity enhances problem-solving by considering various viewpoints, leading to comprehensive treatment plans that meet all patient needs. Training programs should include scenarios that promote cultural competence development, helping clinicians navigate cultural identity complexities related to health beliefs. Ultimately, embracing cultural sensitivity enhances patient outcomes and enriches a clinician's professional growth in a globalized world.

Ultimately, trainee physicians should recognize the dignity of each person, regardless of their health, culture, or beliefs. Demonstrating respect and cultural sensitivity nurtures a positive physician-patient bond that encourages patients to be open and compliant, which is vital for accurate diagnosis and successful treatment.

### Adaptability

Although perhaps not traditionally thought of as a communication skill, adaptability is another vital quality for trainee physicians. Being adaptable allows clinicians to adjust their interactions with patients to navigate complex health care situations and meet their diverse needs. Moreover, adaptability is integral to effective collaboration among multidisciplinary teams as it fosters a flexible mindset, helping physicians manage uncertainties and complexities in clinical environments while maintaining resilience and effectiveness in high-pressure situations.

### Managing Difficult Conversations

From delivering bad news to engaging with skeptical patients regarding treatment options, managing difficult conversations is inevitable for physicians and not an easy skill for trainees to master. Such scenarios require not only medical knowledge, but a high degree of emotional intelligence. Douglas Stone, the writer of *Difficult Conversations*, says, "Difficult con-

versations are almost never about getting the facts right. They are about conflicting perceptions, interpretations, and values."

Delivering bad news, such as a terminal diagnosis or the failure of a treatment, demands sensitivity, empathy, and transparency. Similarly, discussing treatment plans with skeptical patients involves addressing their concerns and doubts effectively, ensuring they feel heard and respected. These conversations can significantly affect patient trust and treatment adherence.

Successfully managing these complex interactions with grace and professionalism requires one to stay calm. This establishes the mood for the conversation and promotes constructive dialogue. As noted earlier, it is also important to communicate clearly and empathetically, avoiding complex medical terms that might confuse or distance patients. Furthermore, it is important to confirm that patients grasp the information shared. This might entail restating critical details and prompting patients to voice their comprehension or worries. By engaging in difficult discussions with empathy, tolerance, and courtesy, physicians can cultivate a nurturing atmosphere that stimulates honest communication, ultimately enhancing patient care and satisfaction.

### Conclusion

Communication is a cornerstone of a strong physician-patient relationship and a high-functioning health care team. Thus, it is imperative that as trainee physicians hone their medical expertise, they also master communication skills, such as active listening and clear messaging. By doing so, they will be better prepared to work effectively in medical teams and to provide high-quality patient-centered care throughout their careers.

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