

Clinical review
Key communication skills and how
to acquire them

Dr.M.A.Kubtan, MD- FRCS

Summary points

Doctors with good communication skills identify patients

problems more accurately

Their patients adjust better psychologically and are more satisfied with their care

Doctors with good communication skills have greater job satisfaction and less work stress

Effective methods of communication skills training are available

The opportunity to practice key skills and receive constructive feedback of performance is essential

Box 1: Key tasks in communication with patients

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Eliciting

(a)

the patient's main problems;

(b)

the

patient's perceptions of these; and

(c)

the physical,

emotional, and social impact of the patient's problems

on the patient and family

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Tailoring information to what the patient wants to know; checking his or her understanding



Eliciting the patient's reactions to the information given and his or her main concerns



Determining how much the patient wants to participate in decision making (when treatment options are available)



Discussing treatment options so that the patient understands the implications



Maximising the chance that the patient will follow agreed decisions about treatment and advice about changes in lifestyle

Blocking behaviour

- Offering advice and reassurance before the main problems have been identified
- Explaining away distress as normal
- Attending to physical aspects only
- Switching the topic
- “Jollying” patients along

Reasons for patients not disclosing problems

- Belief that nothing can be done
- Reluctance to burden the doctor
- Desire not to seem pathetic or ungrateful
- Concern that it is not legitimate to mention them
- Doctors' blocking behaviour
- Worry that their fears of what is wrong with them will be confirmed

Effective teaching methods

- Provide evidence of current deficiencies in communication, reasons for them, and the consequences for patients and doctors
- Offer an evidence base for the skills needed to overcome these deficiencies
- Demonstrate the skills to be learned and elicit reactions to these
- Provide an opportunity to practise the skills under controlled and safe conditions
- Give constructive feedback on performance and reflect on the reasons for any blocking behaviour

Access to training
Sources of information

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Administrators of postgraduate centres

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Advertisements in professional journals

Well established courses

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Medical Interview Teaching Association,
London

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Cancer Research UK Psychological Medicine
Group, Manchester

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Cancer research UK Psycho Oncology Group,
Brighton