

Editorial

Effective communication is the key for healthcare professionals

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Apart from our hard skills, every professional must develop soft skills to consolidate their complex skills to attain professional development. Hard skills are those that specific to one's profession. These skills can be measured, quantified and easier to learn. Both verbal and written communication are essential components of professionalism. These skills help interact with colleagues, allied health workers and patients who seek counselling. Some of the practical communication skills involve face-to-face, online video calls or email. One of the main attributes of vocal communication is being an active listener and listening to the patient [1]. Before discussing the various aspects of communication skills, what are the associated factors that will promote proper communication? What are the barriers that prevent having a helpful conversation with the patient? How could one motivate a person to undergo counselling or participate in appropriate touch with the health professional? Counselling forms one of the essential aspects of patient care where proper and transparent communication are required. One could broadly classify these requirements into: organic - physical, psychological, social and genetic.

Depending upon the cases, the counselling or communication center could be attached to a particular specialty. Therefore, the location of the communication room, physical setup and helpful information and appointment (schedule of communication) counter must be in place. There needs to be a proper record section to register the patient data (electronic or otherwise). The

counsellor or the health professional needs to be appropriately trained regarding the various aspects of communication. It has to be one of the crucial sections of the clinical departments linked to it. Dealing with vulnerable populations or people with genetic disorders need exceptional communication skills with adequate competency to deal with such cases. Some of the barriers that need to be considered are the patient's race/culture, gender, speech ability, language, time constraints, illness, mental state, medication and psychological aspects. In other words, a proper case history has to be recorded initially to design an action plan. One of the essential domains of healthcare professionals is communication skills. The basic communication skills required are verbal and non-verbal communication.

Verbal communications help to connect with the patient to know what he needs and what he is. The patient wants the professional to understand what he is and what he wishes to receive from him. The key elements of verbal communication include a choice of words, language, articulation and delivery.

Choice of words: The communicator must develop the skill to greet the patient using the patient's language with a tone of deference and confidence to establish a rapport with the patient. Once rapport with the case is formed, analyzing the patient's need requires a systematic questioning of the patient with the right choice of words to get relaxed. Once the claim is relaxed, they open up the

mind slowly to their problems and how that physical or psychological problem affects the patient's mental health.

Language: Choice of the language: native language spoken or understood by the case level of the language: educational background of the matter in question. Use of language: uncomplicated but with a considerate tone. Articulation: it needs to be simple and without ambiguity. Delivery: it has to be clear, understandable. In other words, the counsellor or health care professional needs to communicate with the person in the native language of the case with clarity and empathy. Other factors influence verbal communication, like face-to-face communication or through social media using a mobile phone or a laptop or another communication device. Effective verbal communication needs an experimental setup where the communication between the counsellor and the patient takes place. The environment needs to be congenial, open and well-ventilated with privacy. The counsellor needs to have a correct perception of the type of communication he or she needs to adopt to understand the patient and the patients' needs. The health professional has to greet the patient with a facial expression, say with a smile and salutation as sir or madam. The initial setting up of a conducive environment and a pleasant language in a comfortable physical environment will help develop a quick connection with the patient. Apart from having good proficiency in communication, the health professional has adequate knowledge and an ability to apply the method of communication to derive or obtain precise information from the patient. Such a rapport with the patient will open up the conversation. The communicator needs to use open-ended questions with an affirmative voice and the capacity to reflect upon the sequence of information gathered from the case. For example, if a patient visits you intending to get guidance to tackle his or her health problem, say with obesity.

Counsellor: Hello, good morning. How are you today? and followed by the question, how do you feel? will make the patient comfortable and slowly help open up his mind with you. A simple approach that may appeal to the patient to say in an affirmative voice that obesity has become a universal health problem will make the patient understand that you have understood his or her concern about his body habitus. Then the patient will come out with his or her problem related to obesity. He or she may ask how to reduce body weight. After the initial conversation, a psychomotor skill like measuring body weight, height and calculating body mass index (BMI) will help you construct a plan of action that needs to be

said to the patient in no uncertain terms. In other words, depending upon the case to be dealt verbal communication has to be molded to suit the condition and status of the patient. We had already discussed a patient with an obesity problem. Let see if we encounter a patient with AIDS; what type of communication needs to be planned and executed? The most critical component of skilled communication involves a confidence-building setup. It depends upon the characteristics of the patient one needs to plan. Some of the demographic characteristics the health professional need to take into consideration are: age, gender, marital status, educational background and the family setup and cultural background. Being a syndrome attached to social stigma, the communicator has to build trust and confidence with the patient. If the communicator has to counsel a female patient, a female attendant must accompany the counsellor. If the patient is married, the communicator must design a method to protect the family from social ostracism, develop an action plan, set up a treatment plan, psychological and family support. The most challenging job will be to give hope to the patient to face reality and make the patient follow the instructions given by the health professional. These two different case scenarios demonstrate how important it is for the professional to become an effective communicator.

Non-verbal communication supports verbal communication that involves facial expression, voice, body language, family support and teamwork. Apart from verbal communication, messages play a vital role in healthcare. Messages could be in the form of email, sharing of information through social media, video calls, mobile data and communication platforms. There are many communication platforms like google drive, Skype, Microsoft office and many more such platforms. WebEx, Zoom and others enable online communication, which enables sharing, transferring information, files and data. Telecommunication and Tele-health form the recent trends in the COVID-19 pandemic. When dealing with a patient, sometimes it requires the communicator to be well-versed in networking which links the healthcare professional to the patient, to the diagnostic centers, general practitioner, specialist, nutritionist, physiotherapist and nursing personnel. Therefore, good communication or effective communication between the health care provider and patient helps the patient with good amount of recovery, alleviates anxiety, helps the patient to adhere to the treatment regimen and sometimes, relieves the patient from pain [2]. Communication plays a

great role in cancer patient and cancer survivor. The communication between the care giver and the patient is honest and transparent which conveys information regarding diagnosis, prognosis, treatment options and relief from psychological stress that may improve the quality of life [3, 4]. The healthcare professional has to have the communication skill to inform the patient about poor prognosis and the ability to identify those that involve patient confidentiality. Communications issues sometime may lead to litigation and therefore, verbal communication need to be coupled with written or sometimes recorded version. Very poor communication skills may result in stress, poor job satisfaction and burn out syndrome [5]. In other words, communication skills and use involves mostly about the patient information apart from the communication between the administrator and health personnel, communication between the health personnel, between doctors and lab professionals and lastly between the physician and the patient. From admitting the patient, preparing the patient card, the admission process, billing, referral to the pharmacy and allocation of room, the communication sent to the attending physician, support staff, nurse and diagnostic services fill what we call a huge communication space.

Example: Clinical Laboratory Service: There is a good example that involves laboratory service. Clinical laboratory is one of the information processing domain that involves a network of personnel. The personnel include: the physician who refers the patient for investigation, the lab director who receives the patients and the referral requisition slip, who decides the investigations to be done, the phlebotomist who collects the blood and label it, the person who delivers the sample to the lab assistant who analyses the sample, the person who enters the result, the computer assistant who records the data into the system and prints it, the report card signing authority. The framework is organized according to six principles to ensure WHO communications are accessible, actionable, credible and trusted, relevant, timely and understandable (WHO, 2020, **Figure 1**, [6]).

- *Patients often are insufficiently involved in care decisions:* Fewer than half of the patients receive clear information on the benefits and trade-offs of the treatments for their condition, and fewer than half are satisfied with their level of control in medical decision making.
- *Patient-centered care has been correlated with better health care outcomes and quality of life, as well as other benefits:* The use of patient-centered care in a

primary care setting has been associated with reduced pain and discomfort, faster recovery in physical health and improvements in emotional health.



Figure 1: WHO principles for effective communications

- *If implemented properly, meaningful engagement of patients in their own care has the potential to reduce costs:* For example, it has been reported that informed patients are up to 20 percent less likely than other patients to choose elective surgery [5].

In conclusion, during COVID-19 pandemic health professional need to develop good communication skills. Good communication skills will lead to professionalism. The information that are given to patients, their families and the community has to be transparent, true and scientifically relevant. The awareness one creates about the pandemic includes mode of infection, transmission, symptoms, vaccines, vaccination, viral heterogeneity and mutations. Such transmission of true information requires proper training of health personnel including the social media in developing good communication skills.

Competing interests

The authors have no competing interest.

Author's contribution

All authors contributed equally.

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