Key communication skills
and how to acquire them
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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 practise key skills and receive constructive feedback of performance is essential
HOW

- Firstly, doctors identify their patients' problems more accurately.
- Secondly, their patients are more satisfied with their care and can better understand their problems, investigations, and treatment options.
- Thirdly, patients are more likely to adhere to treatment and to follow advice on behaviour change.
- Fourthly, patients' distress and their vulnerability to anxiety and depression are lessened.
- Finally, doctors' own wellbeing is improved.
Key tasks in communication with patients

Eliciting

• The patient's main problems.
• The patient's perceptions of these; and physical, emotional, and social impact of the patient's problems on the patient and family
• 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
Deficiencies in communication

• Only half of the complaints and concerns of patients are likely to be elicited.
• Often doctors obtain little information about patients' perceptions of their problems or about the physical, emotional, and social impact of the problems.
• When doctors provide information they do so in an inflexible way and tend to ignore what individual patients wish to know.
• They pay little attention to checking how well patients have understood what they have been told.
• Less than half of psychological morbidity in patients is recognised.
• Often patients do not adhere to the treatment and advice that the doctor offers, and levels of patient satisfaction are variable.
Deal with psychosocial issues

- Inquire about the social and emotional impact of patients' problems, and family lest this unleashes distress that they cannot handle.
- They fear it will increase patients' distress, take up too much time, and threaten their own emotional survival.
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.
Skills needed to perform key tasks

- Establish eye contact at the beginning of the consultation.
- Encourage patients to be exact about the sequence in which their problems occurred.
- Ask for dates of key events and about patients' perceptions and feelings.
- Use “active listening” to clarify what patients are concerned about.
- Avoid interrupting before patients have completed important statements.
Continue

• Summarise information to show patients they have been heard.
• Give them an opportunity to correct any misunderstandings.
• Inquire about the social and psychological impact of important illnesses or problems on the patient and family.
• Check what patients consider might be wrong and how those beliefs have affected them.
## Giving information

- Ask patients what information they would like.
- Present information by category.
- Check that the patient has understood before moving on.
- With complex illnesses or treatments, check if the patient would like additional information.
Discussing treatment options

• Properly inform patients of treatment options.
• Check if they want to be involved in decisions.
• Determine the patient's perspective before discussing lifestyle changes for example, giving up smoking.
• Use empathy to show that you have some sense of how the patient is feeling.
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- The opportunity to practise key skills and receive constructive feedback of performance is essential