Effective Communication Skills And Active Listening

“Extensive research has shown that no matter how knowledgeable a clinician might be if he or she is not able to open good communication with the patient, he or she may be of no help.” Effective communication skills are extremely crucial in every professional environment, and especially in the field of medicine and healthcare as a whole. There is proof from previously done research that more than half of the patients discharged from hospitals don’t know what their diagnoses and medications are. You may have every skill necessary to help treat patients, but if you lack the ability to communicate with them effectively, your relationship with your patient will be tense and uncomfortable, and your patient may have difficulty in managing their health issues and diseases due to being undereducated about the extent of their illness. There are many factors that play into being a good communicator and have the proper skillset to effectively communicate with your patients. In this essay I will be highlighting a few, like active listening, empathy, paraphrasing, and giving summaries.

Before talking about the factors that make communication between doctors and patients more efficient, I will mention some of the common problems that occur during the communications between healthcare workers and patients. The first problem is not enough information being provided to the patient to understand their problem. Patients who are given inadequate information at the time of diagnosis are at greater risk of affective disorders. The second reason is the excessive use of jargon when speaking to a patient. Studies have shown that doctors will use medical terms with patients regardless of the patient’s medical terms literacy. In return, most patients don’t show signs of not understanding the medical terms being used, and so the patient won’t be fully informed. The third issue is the lack of approaches to optimize patient recall and understanding. Although patients often remember most of the things their doctor will tell them, they won’t fully understand the key points and will therefore be uninformed on most of the important information that they are being given, and most of the time they won’t let the doctor know about their confusion and lack of understanding. There are many other problems that often occur when a doctor or any other healthcare worker communicates with a patient and doctors need to pay more attention to being more informative in a way that the patient will fully understand and create a comfortable environment for the patient to ask questions about the details they don’t particularly understand.

Active Listening

Active listening is paying complete attention to what another person is saying. It involves listening closely while showing interest and, importantly, refraining from interrupting. Active listening is about hearing more than what is being said. It is listening not only for content, but also for the intent and feeling of the speaker. Active listening is important in every area of work, and especially in the field of medicine. When practicing active listening, you have to give your patient your whole undivided attention because although you meet dozens of patients every day and it may seem like all you need to do is get through patients and diagnose them as fast as possible, you must also remember to answer your patient’s questions and worries and encourage them to keep speaking by asking them questions and being involved and interested so they don’t feel like they’re not being listened to. One of the main reasons Active Listening is very important is because many people don’t entirely depend on verbal communication to

communicate Some people do not clearly say what they feel, think, or want. They give clues instead. Through AL, you may be able to spot and understand the person's clues. By exploring and learning about a person's thoughts, you can better understand that person. This then allows you to know his real ideas, feelings, and concerns. There are generally four main categories of listeners: non-listener; marginal listener; evaluative listener; and active listener, with active listener being the highest attainable listening category. Active listening has three main criteria: showing complete interest in what the patient is saying through nonverbal gestures, not showing any judgment towards what the patient is saying and repeating what the patient has said through verbal paraphrasing, and lastly asking the patient to elaborate and speak more on what they were saying and on other things like their beliefs, feelings, and experiences.

One of the main goals of active listening is to be able to convince your patient that you are listening to them and that they have your full undivided attention. You may do this through verbal and non-verbal cues. Verbal cues include verbal encouragement, like saying things like ‘I see’ or ‘go on’, attentive silence, reflecting a speaker’s feelings and content, and summarizing the patient’s words. Active listeners may also use nonverbal cues to show that they are paying attention. These include attentive posture, facial expression, and maintaining eye contact. Both verbal and nonverbal communication pay a very large role in strengthening the doctor-patient relationship and there needs to be a good balance of both to maintain the connection.

Empathy

Another crucial aspect of effective communication skills is empathy. Empathy is an emotional experience between an observer and a subject in which the observer, based on visual and auditory cues, identifies and transiently experiences the subject's emotional state. Empathy is especially important in the field of medicine. To restore and ensure public trust in the medical profession, new generations of physicians must understand the emotional, physiological, and practical consequences of discarding empathy. One legacy of medical education is overvaluing scientific measurement and undervaluing subjective experiences. The topic of empathy is often not given enough attention and importance in the education process of medicine, but it is one of the most important skills to have. If you lack empathy as a healthcare professional, you will never be able to have an effective and close relationship with your patients and your patients will leave your presence completely unsatisfied.

There are two ways professionals may approach the idea of empathy in a clinical environment. Some may say that a doctor shouldn’t have to react empathetically to every patient as this will be emotionally taxing for the doctor and generally close to impossible. Those who support this idea will argue that doctors need to think logically and not let their emotions interfere with their decisions and they shouldn’t be emotionally involved with their patients if they want to make completely objective clinical decisions. But this way of thinking may be very harmful for both doctors and patients. Patients will mostly be satisfied with their medical experience if their doctor seems to be a good listener and emphasizes with the patient’s worries and troubles. This piece of information shows us that doctors need to learn to keep a balance between being too emotionally involved and not being empathetic at all, because of these will have consequences and may lead to a lot of long-term and short-term issues for both the patient and the doctor. Some patients may be very difficult to deal with, because of the way they act. They may have many behavioral issues that as a regular person you may not feel as though you

might have to deal with, but as a healthcare professional it is your complete responsibility to treat them with respect and be very empathetic towards them because there must be a reason they are acting this way and they may be in a bad mental space due to health issues, anxiety, stress, …etc. So you must always be empathetic towards your patients in order to understand their concerns and issues and to make them feel less tense and anxious.

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing plays a huge role in improving doctor-patient communication. Paraphrasing is a restatement of a text, passage, or work giving the meaning in another form. In a medical environment, paraphrasing is rewording what your patient has already said to you and repeating it to them to show them that you've been listening and paying attention to what they were saying and that you also understood what their issues and concerns were. When you are paraphrasing you should make sure that your tone is not judgmental whatsoever, because the patient is in a vulnerable situation and if you imply that their issues and concerns are invalid, they might feel like they're being talked down to and will have difficulty giving you more information and details about their illness and other problems as well.

As a healthcare worker, one of your main priorities must be making your patient comfortable, and paraphrasing, or reflecting, what the patient is trying to communicate to you is one of the main ways to gain their trust and make sure they feel like they're being listened to and that the information they're giving you is very valid and significant. If you repeat what your patient has said to you using different wording and a little more elaboration to give further information on the issues they're discussing, they will immediately start becoming much more willing to open up to you and elaborate more on what they were saying, because now they are more confident that what they're saying and feeling makes sense and they're not overreacting.

Clinical Summaries

Medically, clinical summaries are the instructions and information a doctor will give at the end of your visit. CMS has defined the clinical summary as "an after-visit summary (AVS) that provides a patient with relevant and actionable information and instructions containing the patient name, provider's office contact information, date and location of visit, an updated medication list, updated vitals, reason(s) for visit, procedures and other instructions based on clinical discussions that took place during the office visit, any updates to a problem list, immunizations or medications administered during visit, summary of topics covered/considered during visit, time and location of next appointment/testing if scheduled, or a recommended appointment time if not scheduled, list of other appointments and tests that the patient needs to schedule with contact information, recommended patient decision aids, laboratory and other diagnostic test orders, test/laboratory results (if received before 24 hours after visit), and symptoms."

Giving your patients a summary after they visit you serves three main purposes: it helps the patient remember the details of your meeting for later use, it encourages the patient to be more involved in making healthy decisions in their own lives especially those with chronic illnesses, and it also improves the quality of the information that the doctor and other healthcare workers will receive, because by being transparent with the patient and fully informing them about the outcomes of the visit, the patient can provide further information or correct any mistakes that the clinician may have made. Summaries are generally a very crucial part of active communication,

which is very significant in the medical environment. It serves an important role to make sure everything that the doctor has told the patient and everything that the patient has told the doctor is clear and that there is no confusion whatsoever. If there are any issues or misunderstandings, the other person can clear it up during the summary part of the meeting.

Conclusion

Effective communication has a very high significance in every area of expertise, but it has an even bigger impact in the area of medicine, because medicine involves the lives of people and a mistake in the communication between a doctor and their patient may be a life or death situation, literally. So doctors and healthcare workers must pay a huge amount of attention to their communication skills to provide the best quality of service available to their patients. Active listening is the best way to ensure that you’re communicating with your patients to the highest degree possible, and you must use other skills to help the connection between you and your patient grow and create a comfortable environment for both of you. Some of these skills are empathy, paraphrasing, and summarizing. By using all of these skills, you will be able to effectively communicate with your patients and give them a good experience. This is why we should emphasize the importance of communication skills in the education system of medicine students, so that they have a strong foundation for when they eventually grow to be doctors working in the healthcare industry and meet patients in order to give them a pleasant visit devoid of any issues.