

Communication with doctor is two-way street

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A hospital patient recently shared, "I think it would be a wonderful thing if my doctor looked at me instead of through me; if he would talk to me instead of down to me. This is my health and I want to make sure I make the right decision. I may not be able to explain myself using the terminology that he is accustomed, but I need my physician to work with me for my healing. I do not want to feel that I am just another name on the list or another candidate for a clinical trial."

Even the most highly educated, wealthy, or well-connected people can become flustered, sheepish, confused, and/or intimidated when they visit their healthcare provider. Patients have to navigate a health system filled with numerous obstacles: complicated paperwork, confusing bills, and daunting gatekeepers to name a few. By the time they make it to a physician's office there is one last hurdle: communication.

We live in the City of Medicine, with arguably one of the best health care networks in the country. Nearly one in three people in Durham work in a health-related field, and the city boasts a physician-to-population ratio that is four times greater than the national average. However, at one time or another, many of us have left a health care provider's office more confused than when we went in.

Miscommunication between a health care provider and patient is dangerous. Communication breakdowns cost the health care industry an estimated \$58 billion a year and are the primary root cause of the nearly 3,000 catastrophic injuries and unexpected deaths. Studies show that between 40 and 80 percent of medical information that patients receive is forgotten immediately and nearly half of what is remembered is not remembered correctly.

We can improve health outcomes in Durham by improving patient-provider communication. In this article, we will address the patient's role in communicating with their healthcare provider; next month, we will discuss ways that providers can improve communication.

Communication is a two-way street and medical providers often have very tight time schedules. As patients, we need to help make the most use of this time by sharing useful information and asking clarifying questions when needed. Here are a few tips that can help:

Before your appointment:

- *Write down any symptoms you have experienced and questions you have.*
- *Ask a trusted family member or friend to be your advocate and be with you during your interaction with your provider.*

During your appointment:

- *Speak up.* It is easy to become intimidated during your appointment and to avoid asking your questions. If you do not understand your medical provider's answer, ask again. It is your body and you have a right to know exactly what is happening. Make sure you have addressed and understand each issue you wrote down before you leave the exam room.
- *Know your medications.* Drug interactions may make of your some medicines less effective or too strong. Some drug interactions or medication side effects can be harmful or even deadly. When talking to your provider about your medications, remember to:
 - Create a list or show your provider all the medicines that you take. Be sure to include any medicines that you buy over-the-counter (without a prescription) and any herbs or vitamin supplements.
 - Let the provider know about any allergy or problem that you have had with medicines in the past.
 - Ask your provider to explain your prescription before you get it filled, including the drug name - if applicable, both brand and generic - and how often you should take it.
 - Ask your provider to write the purpose of each medicine on the prescription. This can help you and your pharmacist double-check the prescription.
- *Share other information as well.* Too often, we think that healthcare providers only need to know about our physical symptoms. While it may be difficult to share personal information, it is important to let your doctor know if you are grieving the loss of a family member, having a difficult time at work or experiencing something else that worries you. Feeling down or worried can affect our physical health.
- *Most importantly, remember to "Ask Me Three."* Know the answers to the following three questions before you leave the exam room. Repeat your provider's answers in your own words to make sure you fully understand and will remember when you get home.
 1. What is my main problem or concern?
 2. What do I need to do?
 3. Why is it important for me to do this?

Following these simple steps will help you obtain safer medical care. Make sure to look for the next article in this series on how providers can prevent communication breakdowns.

Health Advocacy and Communication

Helpful tips about **talking with your doctor:**

- www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/talkingwithyourdoctor.html
- A new book, How Doctors Think, by Jerome Groopman, is helpful to patients and providers.

Information on **medication safety:**

- www.seniorpharmassist.org/advice/
- www.fda.gov/cder/consumerinfo/active12panelEng.htm
- US Department of Health & Human Services Food & Drug Administration at 1-888-INFO-FDA

Being an **active member of the healthcare team:**

- www.cfinfo.org – from the Council on Family Health

There are two programs specifically designed to help people **access and understand the healthcare system in Durham:**

- Durham Community Health Network – for Medicaid recipients, 620-8034
- LATCH – for uninsured and underinsured residents, 620-8034 x224

Consumer and Patient Safety

Consumers Advancing Patient Safety - www.patientsafety.org

Persons United Limiting Substandards and Errors in Health Care - www.PULSEAmerica.org

Research Advocacy Network - www.researchadvocacy.org - connects patient advocates with the research community to improve patient care.