

Doctors need to improve 'orders'

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Edith Rodriguez, 43, died of a perforated bowel in May in California. It's a tragedy when anyone dies so young, however, Rodriguez died unnecessarily while waiting in an emergency room because neither she or two others trying to help her could get a healthcare provider's attention.

While Edith's case is an extreme example, miscommunications occur daily in medical settings. They are the primary root cause of the nearly 3,000 reported catastrophic injuries and unexpected deaths in the US, which cost an estimated \$58 billion a year. Hopefully such an extreme breakdown in communication will never occur in Durham. After all, Durham has one of the best healthcare systems in the country. Yet even here, patients can leave providers' offices feeling unheard and confused.

A physician recently shared: "It wasn't until I graduated from medical school and assessed my first patient for a surgical procedure that I realized that what I learned in my 'Patient Communication and Physical Diagnosis' class was not enough. During medical school, I never once thought about all of the other factors a patient may bring to the examination room. I know now that in addition to their disease or illness, their education level, communication skills, language, non-verbal behavior, culture, family, beliefs, or even their fears are all things a healthcare provider must consider. A patient's mental health, finances and social support are important factors that should be considered as well. And all of these complex issues must be addressed in a 15 to 30 minute encounter."

It is not surprising that miscommunications occur in medical settings. Medical providers have to make complex information easy to understand. Their patients and patients' families often have complex needs. Providers are generally busy and under pressure. However, these are not excuses for poor communication.

Half of all adults have difficulty understanding and using health information. Even well educated people may have trouble comprehending a medical form or doctor's instructions. In addition, many patients hide confusion from their providers because they are too ashamed or intimidated to ask for help.

Here are a few tips to help healthcare providers avoid communication breakdowns:

- *Listen.* The most common complaint patients have about their doctors is that they don't listen. A recent report notes that doctors listen for an average of 18 seconds before they interrupt, possibly missing important information. Taking time to listen to patients reduces problems with non-adherence to medical recommendations, because patients are active participants in the design of their own treatment plans.

- *Speak slowly and clearly using short, simple sentences.* The rate that information is provided greatly affects how much patients learn and remember. Speaking in plain language is one of the best ways to ensure that patients will understand and adopt recommendations. Don't assume patients will understand basic medical terminology.
- *Stick to one topic at a time.* Moving quickly from one topic to another can be confusing. Try to ensure patients understand one topic before moving on to the next.
- *Remember to "Ask Me Three."* The three most important questions to answer are:
 1. What is the patient's problem or concern?
 2. What does the patient need to do?
 3. Why is it important for the patient to do this?
 Before patients leave the office, make sure they can answer these three questions correctly in their own words.
- *Avoid distractions.* Researchers recommend that if you give patients your undivided attention for at least the first 60 seconds, they feel that a meaningful amount of time was spent with them. Reduce distractions, such as other people and background noise.
- *Sit face to face.* This simple act sends the message that your patients and your advice are important. Adherence with treatment recommendations is greater following encounters in which the provider is face to face with the patient.
- *Maintain eye contact.* Maintaining eye contact creates a more positive, trusting, and comfortable atmosphere that may result in patients opening up and providing additional information.
- *Simplify and write down your instructions.* Keep instructions simple. State and write instructions in a basic, easy-to-follow, and legible format.
- *Ask your patients to keep written records of their medical history and current medication use.* This is particularly important when individuals see more than one doctor and use more than one pharmacy.
- *Learn about your patients' cultures and beliefs.* Whenever possible, try to learn about your patients' traditions, rituals and health-related cultural and spiritual beliefs. Realize that history and past experiences have shaped your patients' views of the healthcare system.

When medical providers use communication skills effectively, everyone benefits. Good communication helps identify patients' problems more accurately, increases adherence with treatment or lifestyle advice, reduces complaints, and ensures that patients' views are considered. Providers are also less likely to make clinical errors or get sued, and best of all, good communication improves the patients' well-being. Effective communication in our harried healthcare settings is a shared responsibility for all of us.

CLIP AND SAVE

American College of Physicians Foundations, compendium of health literacy resources:

<http://foundation.acponline.org/hl/hlresources.htm>

American Academy of Family Physicians, list of health literacy resources:

<http://www.aafp.org/online/en/home/clinical/publichealth/ptpops/healthliteracyresources.html>

Partnership for Clear Health Communication is a coalition of national organizations that are working together to promote awareness and solutions around the issue of low health literacy and its effect on health outcomes. <http://www.askme3.org/PFCHC/>

The Institute of Medicine wrote a study in 2004 entitled "Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion"

- <http://www.iom.edu/CMS/3775/3827/19723.aspx>