

What you say and how you say it – The art of communication in health care

Part 2 – Strategies for effective communication with patients

By Barbara Gobis B.Sc.(Pharm.), ACPR, M.Sc.Pharm.; Larry Leung B.Sc.(Pharm.), R.Ph.; Jason Min B.Sc.(Pharm.), R.Ph.; and Andrea Paterson B.Sc.(Pharm.), R.Ph.

Strong positive correlations exist between a health care professional's communication skills and a patient's ability to follow through with health recommendations, self-manage a chronic medical condition, and adopt preventive health behaviours. A clinician's ability to explain, listen, and empathize has a profound effect on biological and functional health outcomes as well as patient satisfaction and experience of care.¹

A pharmacist will interact with hundreds of thousands of patients over the course of a typical career. In fact, the patient interview is the most common health care procedure used by all health care professionals, including pharmacists.

Given the frequency and importance of effective communication with patients, pharmacists need to continually strive to develop their communication skills. In the last issue of *The Tablet*, Part 1 of this article provided practical communication

and collaboration strategies for effective communication with other health care professionals. Part 2 provides practical strategies for pharmacists to optimize their interactions with patients.

Stating the obvious

Communication between a patient and a pharmacist is first and foremost an interaction between two human beings. Patients need to feel respected and valued, have a voice in health care decisions, and be treated with courtesy. Although these points are obvious and intuitive, they need to be remembered, especially during hectic and stressful times.

Understanding between experts

An interaction between a pharmacist and a patient is a meeting of experts. Pharmacists have expertise and knowledge about medications. Patients are experts on themselves - their own beliefs, attitudes, living conditions, daily routines,

past experiences with medications, and personal circumstances.

The purpose of the interaction between these experts is to optimize the patient's drug therapy outcomes so the patient's needs are at the centre of all discussions. Patients need to be engaged in all aspects of their care.

This patient-centred philosophy is integrated throughout the standardized approach to patient care that has been established at the Pharmacists Clinic at the UBC Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences. The Assessment step includes information-gathering from the patient. The Care Plan step involves negotiation with the patient to identify and prioritize drug therapy problems. The Evaluation step includes shared responsibility between the patient and other health care team members. A diagram of the Comprehensive Medication Management (CMM) service model at the Pharmacists Clinic is provided as Figure 1.

Figure 1: Comprehensive Medication Management (CMM) Patient Care Process

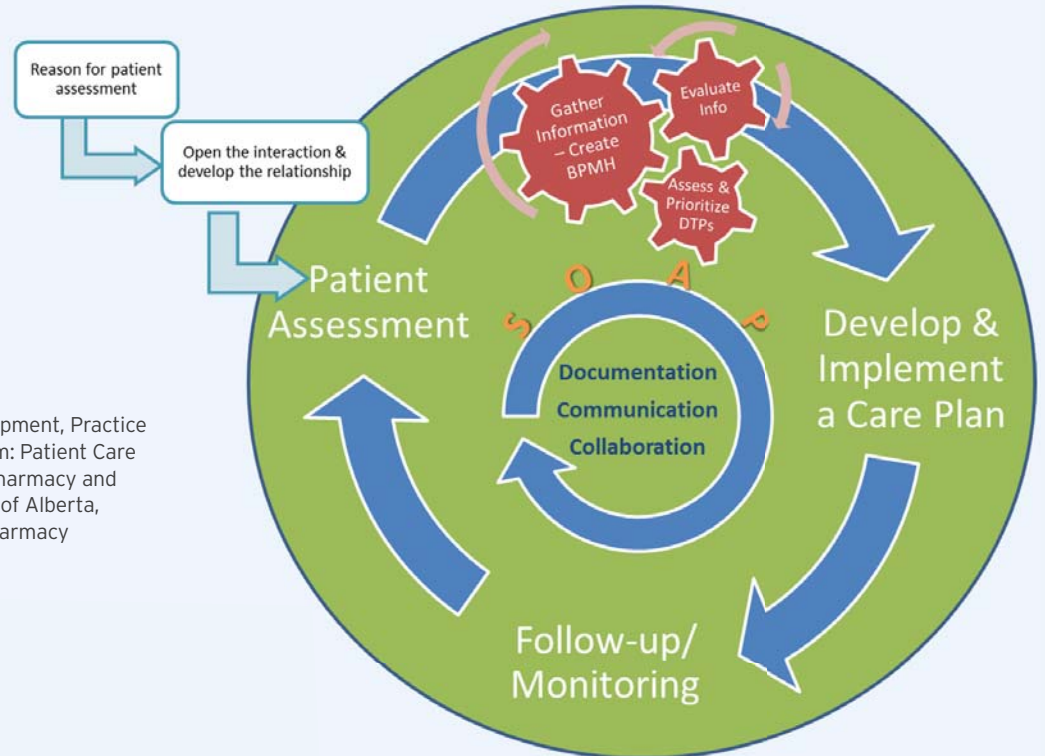


Figure adapted from Practice Development, Practice Skills Bootcamp with permission from: Patient Care Process Working Group, Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta AND Regional Pharmacy Services, Alberta Health Services.

Clarifying questions

Regardless of the patient scenario, a critical first communication step is always for the pharmacist to ask the patient a few

clarifying questions. This gives the pharmacist key information about the patient, their situation, and their needs.

Examples of clarifying questions that can be used to gather information about the

patient's situation are provided in Table 1. Without this first step, a pharmacist has no way of connecting with a patient and is at risk of making incorrect assumptions.

Table 1 - The power of clarifying questions

| Scenario | Assumptions | Clarifying questions (and examples of answers) |
|--|---|---|
| A woman asks for her medications to be reviewed. | She is not doing well. Her treatment is expensive. She does not want to take drugs. | Do you have any specific concerns? <i>She would like to take medications fewer times per day.</i> Has anything recently changed for you? <i>She is going on an extended vacation.</i> What do you want to get from this Medication Review? <i>Wants to know about traveling with Rx in a foreign country.</i> |
| A man asks which decongestant is best. | He is asking for himself. He has a cold. He has not tried anything yet. He is otherwise healthy. | Who will be using this product? <i>His wife.</i> What are her symptoms? <i>She has seasonal allergies.</i> What has she already tried? <i>She has tried saline spray.</i> Any other health conditions? <i>She is three months pregnant.</i> |
| A woman has a prescription for an antidepressant. | She is depressed. She has not taken this before. She is emotional. | What did the doctor tell her? <i>She has PTSD and this will help.</i> Have you taken this before? <i>She took samples for two weeks.</i> Do you have questions for me? <i>When will it start to help?</i> |
| A man asks if he can order Zostavax at the pharmacy. | He wants to get vaccinated. He knows about Zostavax. He is a candidate for Zostavax. | Who will be using the product? <i>He is asking for his 45-year old brother. The caller just recovered from shingles himself.</i> What do you know about it? <i>The caller erroneously thinks that shingles is hereditary.</i> |

Initial clarifying questions need only take a few seconds but the information provided by the patient is extremely valuable to the pharmacist, who can then decide on what to say and do next.

Choosing words wisely

Many people, including those with high literacy, can have trouble understanding the words and jargon used in health care. Some words may be totally unfamiliar and others may be familiar, but a patient may not understand them in a health care context.

Many words pharmacists (and other health care professionals) use routinely can be confusing to patients. Examples are provided in Table 2.² Pharmacists need to choose their words carefully to minimize confusion and maximize patient understanding.

Table 2 - Words to watch and alternatives

| Types of words | Example | Alternatives |
|---------------------|---------------|---|
| Medical terminology | Benign | Will not cause harm, not cancer |
| | Condition | How you feel, health problem |
| | Chronic | On-going |
| | Inhibitor | Drug that stops something that is bad for you |
| | Intermittent | Off and on |
| | Lesion | Wound, sore, infected area of skin |
| | Oral | By mouth |
| | Sublingual | Under the tongue |
| | Hypertension | High blood pressure |
| | Anticoagulant | Reduces the formation of blood clots |
| | Analgesic | Pain reliever |
| | Arrhythmia | Irregular heartbeat |

| | | |
|------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|
| Concepts | Active role | Take part in |
| | Avoid | Stay away from, do not use/eat |
| | Collaborate | Work together |
| | Reassess | Review and possibly change |
| | Intake | What goes into your body |
| | Option | Choice |
| | Referral | Second opinion |
| | Wellness | Good health |
| | Monitor | Keep track of |
| Descriptors | Adverse (reaction) | Bad, unwanted |
| | Cognitive | Learning, thinking |
| | Hazardous | Not safe, dangerous |
| | Non-cancerous | Not cancer |
| | Non-benefit | Cost not covered by a drug plan |
| | Supportive | Helpful |
| Value judgements | Adequate | Enough |
| | Adjust | Fine-tune, change |
| | Cautiously | With care, slowly |
| | Excessive | Too much |
| | Increase gradually | Add to |
| | Moderately | Not too much |
| | Progressive | Get worse (or better) |
| | Routinely | Often |
| | Significantly | Enough to make a difference |
| | Temporary | For a limited time |



Asking clarifying questions and listening to the patient's answers are also useful ways for the pharmacist to get a sense of a patient's level of health literacy. The pharmacist can then choose similar words when providing information to the patient. Asking the patient to summarize their understanding of what they heard is another way for the pharmacist to check that key information has been successfully received by the patient.

Using supplemental written information

Patients already have access to information about medications and health from a variety of sources including the internet. Pharmacists have a responsibility to help patients make sense of the information they have, get answers to their specific questions, and put information into context that is meaningful for their own situation.

Supplemental written information is a useful tool when used in one of two ways:

- As a source of health information the patient reads before having a discussion with the pharmacist, or
- As a written summary of information the patient takes away and reviews after a discussion with the pharmacist.

In either situation, written information is never a replacement for pharmacist-patient conversation. Patients also need to know they can follow up with the pharmacist if they don't understand or have questions about supplemental written information they receive.

Pulling it together

The best chosen words can fall flat if the speaker delivers them without appropriate empathy and active listening.

Active listening:

- Look at your patient and suspend other things you are doing. They deserve your undivided attention.
- Listen to the feelings behind your patient's words.
- Be sincerely interested in what your patient is talking about.
- Restate what your patient said.
- Ask clarifying questions as needed.
- Be aware of your own feelings and any strong opinions that may be forming.
- Reserve your opinions until after you have listened to your patient.

Empathy key points:

- Empathy is the process of becoming aware and in tune with another person's feelings or motives. Empathy is not sympathy and empathy does not mean taking on a patient's problems with or for them.
- Empathy requires the listener to stop listening to their own inner voice and focus attention on the other person.
- Pharmacists need to listen and sense the emotions of the patient to realize true empathy.
- True empathy helps patients feel safe and understood, and opens up the discussion of more issues.

Skilled, artful communication is a cornerstone of a good pharmacist-patient relationship. As this relationship develops, so too does trust and patient satisfaction.³ When patients understand the goals of their treatment and have answers to their questions, the end result is more informed and engaged patients achieving better health outcomes.

References

1. *Impact of Communication in Healthcare*. Institute for Healthcare Communication. <http://healthcarecomm.org/about-us/impact-of-communication-in-healthcare/>
2. *Adapted from: Words to Watch Fact Sheet*. National Patient Safety Foundation. www.npsf.org
3. Worley MM, Hermansen-Kobulnicky CJ. Outcome and self-efficacy expectations for medication management of patients with diabetes: influence of the pharmacist-patient relationship. *J Am Pharm Assoc*. 2008;48(5):621-631.