**The foundation of communications for medical professionals**

**Abstract:** MCI (Medical Council of India) now called NMC (National Medical Council) under Graduate Medical Education Regulations, 2017 has released Competency Based Medical Education (CBME) Curriculum with one of the ~~aim~~ (aims) to create an “Indian Medical Graduate” (IMG) who can communicate adequately, sensitively, effectively and respectfully with the patients and their relatives. For fulfilling this aim AETCOM (Attitude, Ethics and Communication) module ‘Foundation of communication’ was designed. Considering the present scenario of increased violence among doctors has highlighted the need of better communication in medical professional as one of the ~~strategy~~ (strategies) to reduce such incidences of violence. This chapter has focused on various principles of communication, strategies to improve communication and overcome the barriers in communication.

**Introduction:** In the medical profession communication is a basic prerequisite. The undergraduate medical education program was designed with a goal to create an “Indian Medical Graduate” (IMG) under Graduate Medical Education Regulations, 2017 with one of the aim that Indian Medical Graduate should be able to demonstrate ability to communicate adequately, sensitively, effectively and respectfully in patients understandable language which will help in improving patient satisfaction and health care outcomes considering patient’s preferences, values, prior experience, beliefs, confidentiality and privacy and encourages participation of patient and decision-making. For fulfilling this aim AETCOM (Attitude, Ethics and Communication) module ‘Foundation of communication’ was designed.

A doctor must effectively communicate with patients, their relatives, colleagues, healthcare staff, and society at large. While clinical expertise is indispensable, strong communication skills are equally vital for professional success. Given the increasing instances of conflicts between doctors and patients’ relatives, the significance of effective communication has been further emphasized. Patient dissatisfaction, whether stemming from inadequate communication, financial concerns, or personal distress, has been identified as a key factor in such conflicts.1 Training programs can equip healthcare professionals with strategies to enhance their communication skills. Interventions such as question prompt lists can help families overcome barriers to participating in decision-making, thereby improving the overall doctor-patient relationship2.

**Definition of communication:** Various definitions are coined for the communication are enlisted below

1. Keith Davis: Communication is a process of passing information and understanding from one person to another.

2. John Adair: Communication is essentially the ability of one person to make contact with another and make himself or herself understood.

3. William Newman and Charles Summer: Communication is an exchange of ideas, facts, opinions or emotions of two or more persons.

4. Louis Allen: Communication is a bridge of meaning. It involves a systematic and continuous process of telling, listening and understanding.

5. Peter Little: Communication is a process by which information is transmitted between individuals and / or organizations so that an understanding response results.

6. Murphy, Hildebrandt, Thomas: Communication is a process of transmitting and receiving verbal and non-verbal messages. It is considered effective when it achieves the desired response or reaction from the receiver.

Which according to you, is more appropriate keeping medical students in mind?

**Principles of communication3**

* **Principle of Clarity** – The message being communicated should be clearly articulated. Clarity is a fundamental aspect of formal communication. The sender must have a well-defined understanding of the message before conveying it. Doctors should communicate in a conversational tone with precision, avoiding unnecessary fillers.
* **Principle of Attention/Consideration** – To ensure effective communication, it is essential to capture the recipient’s attention. The sender should frame the message from the audience’s perspective, considering their emotions and feelings to foster better understanding.
* **Principle of Feedback/Correctness** – Accuracy in thoughts and words is crucial. Feedback from the recipient helps determine whether the message has been interpreted correctly. Proper use of grammar, well-structured messages, and precise wording enhance clarity and prevent misunderstandings.
* **Principle of Informality/Courtesy** – While formal communication is essential, informal communication can sometimes be more effective. Politeness and courtesy in interactions help strengthen relationships, improve understanding, and create goodwill.
* **Principle of Consistency/Concreteness** – Inconsistent or conflicting messages can lead to confusion. Effective communication requires specificity and clarity. In verbal exchanges, using precise language ensures that the message is well-received, saving time and increasing the likelihood of acceptance.
* **Principle of Timeliness/Urgency/Conciseness** – Timely communication is critical for effectiveness. Delayed communication can aggravate situations and lead to complications. Messages should also be concise, as brevity is a key component of formal communication.
* **Principle of Adequacy/Completeness** – Communication should provide complete and sufficient information. Incomplete messages can cause confusion, delay actions, and create ambiguity in the audience. Ensuring comprehensiveness enhances clarity and facilitates proper decision-making.

**Process of communication4**

The following steps or stages are there in process of communication:

* **Message** – The communication process begins with the creation of a message, which could be an idea, request, suggestion, order, or grievance.
* **Sender** – The sender is the one who initiates communication by taking steps to transmit the message to the intended recipient.
* **Encoding** – This involves structuring the message by expressing it through words, symbols, gestures, diagrams, graphs, or other forms to convey meaning effectively.
* **Medium** – The medium serves as the channel through which the message is communicated. For instance, oral communication may occur via an assistant or a phone call, while written communication can be delivered through letters, notices, text messages, or emails.
* **Recipient/Receiver** – The receiver is the individual for whom the message is intended. Communication is considered complete only when the recipient has received and understood the information.
* **Decoding** – This refers to the recipient’s interpretation of the message, aligning with the sender’s intended meaning.
* **Feedback** – To finalize the communication process, the recipient must provide feedback to the sender. This response reflects the recipient's reaction or understanding of the message.

Communication follows a cyclic process, as demonstrated in the diagram below.5



Listening plays a crucial role in communication, involving complex actions such as understanding, interpreting, and actively focusing on messages. Both verbal and nonverbal feedback contribute to effective communication. For better engagement, a listener should consider the context of the conversation, their perception of the message, and the intended response to it.6

**Types of communication:7**

Communication can take various forms, including verbal, non-verbal, written, and visual methods.

* **Verbal Communication** – This refers to the exchange of ideas and information through spoken words. However, it involves more than just talking; it also includes tone, clarity, and delivery.
* **Nonverbal Communication** – This encompasses all aspects of communication apart from spoken or written words. It plays a significant role in interactions and is often considered more impactful than verbal communication. Research suggests that nearly 80% of communication is nonverbal. It includes body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, and the pacing of conversations.
* **Written Communication** – This form involves conveying ideas and information through written text, often used in professional and formal settings. Examples include text messages, emails, reports, and case summaries.
* **Visual Communication** – This mode relies on images, symbols, and graphics to deliver messages. It is particularly effective in pediatric communication.

### ****Significance of Effective Communication****

A study conducted by Hausberg et al⁸ (2012) highlights the importance of integrating communication training into undergraduate medical education. The study emphasizes that providing students with opportunities to reflect on and practice their communication skills early in their academic journey enables them to develop and refine these competencies throughout their training, making them more proficient in the long run.

### ****Role of Communication in Healthcare****

Effective communication significantly enhances patient care by improving health literacy and fostering trust between patients and healthcare professionals. It empowers patients with better knowledge of their health conditions, facilitates understanding of ongoing treatment strategies, and strengthens patient-provider relationships. This, in turn, can lead to fewer hospital visits, reduced healthcare costs, and improved health outcomes. Additionally, effective communication plays a vital role in mitigating the spread of health misinformation. Various digital tools, such as online patient portals, emails, text messages, social media platforms, mobile applications, websites, live chat services, and blogs, can be leveraged to enhance communication in healthcare settings⁹.

### ****Kalamazoo Consensus Statement on Physician-Patient Communication****

In May 1999, a three-day conference on Physician–Patient Communication in Medical Education was jointly organized by the Bayer Institute for Health Care Communication and the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo, Michigan, North America. The event brought together 21 experts from medical schools, residency programs, continuing medical education providers, and key medical education organizations in North America. The conference aimed to define and structure effective communication training, assessment, and evaluation. The outcome was the Kalamazoo Consensus Statement, which identified seven key communication tasks essential for improving doctor-patient interactions:

1. Establishing a doctor–patient relationship
2. Initiating discussions
3. Gathering information
4. Understanding the patient’s perspective
5. Sharing information
6. Reaching an agreement on diagnosis and treatment plans
7. Providing closure to the conversation

These foundational elements serve as a guiding framework for developing communication-focused curricula and assessment standards¹⁰.

### ****The 5A’s Model for Behavior Change****

Glasgow RE et al. (2006) introduced the 5A’s model, a structured approach to facilitating behavior change in primary care settings. This model comprises five essential steps:

1. **Assess** – Evaluate the patient’s current behavior, beliefs, and level of motivation.
2. **Advise** – Provide recommendations based on the patient’s health risks.
3. **Agree** – Collaborate with the patient to establish realistic and achievable goals.
4. **Assist** – Identify potential barriers and develop an actionable plan to overcome them.
5. **Arrange** – Implement follow-up support to reinforce long-term behavioral change.

The study concluded that while any of these five steps can be applied depending on the situation, the last two—assistance in problem-solving and arranging follow-up support—are particularly crucial in ensuring sustained and meaningful behavioral improvements¹¹.

**Steps for improving communication:**

In the modern era, effective communication is a fundamental requirement for success in medical practice. A competent practitioner must not only convey information accurately but also foster trust, understanding, and collaboration with patients.

### ****Core Principles of Patient-Clinician Communication****¹²

To enhance communication in healthcare, the following key principles should be incorporated:

* **Mutual Respect** – Both the patient and clinician should actively participate as equal partners in decision-making. Respecting each other’s perspectives fosters problem-solving and strengthens the therapeutic relationship.
* **Harmonized Goals** – A shared understanding and consensus regarding the patient’s care plan help in ensuring effective treatment outcomes.
* **Supportive Environment** – Providing a secure and encouraging healthcare setting promotes better decision-making and enhances patient confidence.
* **Appropriate Decision Partners** – The healthcare team involved in patient care should have the necessary expertise and skills suited to the patient's specific medical condition.
* **Access to the Right Information** – Patients should be informed about all available treatment options to make informed decisions regarding their healthcare.
* **Transparency and Full Disclosure** – Clinicians should communicate openly about the limitations of medical science and healthcare systems. Similarly, patients should be encouraged to disclose relevant medical history, preferences, and circumstances.
* **Continuous Learning** – Regular feedback on a patient’s progress and timely adjustments to treatment plans are essential for optimal care.

### ****Key Elements of Effective Communication****¹³

Several essential elements can enhance communication in daily clinical practice:

* **Engaging at Eye Level** – Healthcare providers should interact with patients at eye level, ensuring they feel valued and respected as equal partners in their care.
* **Maintaining Eye Contact** – Eye contact is a crucial aspect of non-verbal communication, signifying attentiveness, empathy, and a genuine willingness to listen. Maintaining eye contact helps in reassuring patients and building trust.
* **Using Positive Gestures** – Body language plays a significant role in communication. Simple gestures like nodding and smiling convey understanding, compassion, and a welcoming attitude, making patients feel more comfortable.

### ****Strategies to Overcome Communication Challenges in Healthcare****¹³

To address common communication barriers in healthcare, the following approaches can be adopted:

* **Providing Access to Medical Records** – Allowing patients to view their medical records promotes active participation in their care. It also reduces the need for prolonged explanations during consultations, easing the communication burden on both patients and healthcare providers.
* **Expanding Teleconsultation Services** – With the growing adoption of telemedicine, clear and precise communication is essential to prevent misunderstandings and ensure patients receive the same quality of care as in-person visits.
* **Minimizing Handwritten Prescriptions and Notes** – Handwritten prescriptions and medical notes may not always be comprehensible to patients, leading to confusion and reduced engagement in their healthcare journey. As patients today seek to be well-informed about their health and treatment options, using clear, structured documentation can enhance their understanding and participation in their care.

Can you give some case scenarios – doctor patient interactions- good, bad and challenging, it will add value to this chapter.

### ****Barriers to Communication in Healthcare****¹⁴

Effective communication in healthcare can be hindered by several barriers, but these can be addressed with appropriate strategies. Some of the most common barriers include:

* **Use of Medical Jargon** – Clarity is essential in communication. Healthcare providers should avoid using complex medical terms, technical jargon, or unfamiliar words when speaking with patients. Instead, information should be conveyed in simple, easy-to-understand language.
* **Lack of Attention** – Following the principle of attention and consideration is crucial. Clinicians often have multiple responsibilities, but when interacting with patients, it is important to pause and focus entirely on them. Patients should feel that they are the primary focus of the conversation.
* **Noise and Distractions** – Healthcare settings can be noisy due to ongoing conversations, televisions, or general background activity. Whenever possible, efforts should be made to create a quiet, calm environment by closing doors, lowering TV volume, or moving to a quieter space for discussions.
* **Lighting Issues** – Poor lighting, whether too dim or too bright, can create communication barriers. Healthcare providers should ensure that lighting conditions are comfortable and appropriate for effective communication.
* **Hearing and Speech Difficulties** – When interacting with patients who have hearing or speech impairments, alternative communication strategies should be employed. This may include using gestures, written notes, pictures, or assistive communication devices to facilitate understanding.
* **Language Barriers** – If a clinician is not fluent in a patient’s primary language, the use of a medical interpreter can be beneficial. Additionally, providing written information in the patient’s preferred language or using an online translation tool can enhance comprehension.
* **Cultural Differences** – Social interactions and expressions of emotions vary across cultures. For example, personal space preferences differ among cultural groups, and some individuals may be reserved in expressing pain, while others may be more vocal. Understanding these variations helps in improving patient interactions.
* **Psychological Barriers** – The emotional and psychological state of both the sender and receiver can influence how messages are delivered and interpreted. Since stress is a major psychological barrier, healthcare providers should implement strategies to help manage the stress response during communication.
* **Physiological Barriers** – A patient’s physical condition can impact their ability to engage in communication. For instance, if a patient is experiencing severe pain, they may struggle to focus on or retain information. In such cases, providing pain relief before patient education ensures better comprehension.
* **Physical Barriers to Nonverbal Communication** – Electronic communication, such as emails or text messages, may not be as effective as face-to-face interactions. Whenever possible, delivering crucial information in person enhances clarity and reduces misunderstandings.
* **Differences in Perception and Viewpoints** – Every individual has unique perspectives and beliefs, and patients want their views to be acknowledged. When they feel unheard or dismissed, they may disengage from their treatment plan. Healthcare professionals should present medical information in a nonjudgmental manner, even if a patient’s beliefs differ from their own, to foster trust and collaboration.

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