

LEARN TO LISTEN TO PATIENT

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Paul Starr highlighted, The profession of medicine, derives its place in society not simply from the special knowledge among its practitioners but from the relationships that physicians form with their patients.¹ Doctors are woven into the fabric of people lives. The fundamental role is to serve humanity by applying expert knowledge and skills. Commitment to humane care is important to what defines medicine as a profession and that gives purpose to the knowledge that physicians labor so hard to acquire. Maimonides, a 12th-century physician and scholar commented, Medical practice is not knitting, weaving and the labor of hands, but it must be inspired with soul, filled with understanding and equipped with the gift of keen observation and compassion.²

What defines a humane physician? Most important is the ability to see patients as 'individuals' with distinctly different psychological and social backgrounds. While offering evidence based medicine and performing procedures, humane physicians must also be able to take care of spiritual and cognitive aspects of the patient which are so important for treatment of illness. Guidelines can serve as aids, but the professional competence demands of a humane physician the ability to be simultaneously analytical, perceptive, and self-reflective. An important quality of the humane physicians has to be the ability to lend a listening ear. The Brazilian physician and novelist Moacyr Scliar said, "Disease is born in silence, but it is manifested through words." "Listen," he said.³

Francis Weld Peabody describes three essential qualities of a caring physician: time, sympathy, and understanding. They all revolve around the capacity and willingness to listen.⁴ Professor Doctor Osler, known as father of medicine, used to be a big champion of doctor patient interaction. In his clinical rounds he would whisper over shoulder of a trainee, "Just listen to your patient, he is telling you the diagnosis." He emphasized the centrality of meticulous history-taking besides exhaustive clinical examination.⁵

Is there a difference between hearing and listening? Hearing involves basic senses while listening involves mind, spirit, and heart. Listening to patients is an important skill but this should be recognized as an active phenomenon. It helps improve diagnosis of patients' problems, it can help understand the psychosocial issues affecting their health, and it may even help to avoid a lawsuit.⁶ However, one has to learn to listen as it is a learned behavior. It is not a passive activity but one that requires skill, practice and patience.^{7,8}

Here are five ways to improve listening to patients in during face-to-face encounters. Firstly, concentrate on the person speaking. One has to be close enough to observe the facial expressions. One has to remember that most communication is nonverbal - like facial expressions, gestures and posture. They convey the patient's inner story so listen and observe vigilantly.⁷ Try to maintain eye contact without staring. Look at the person long enough to notice the color of eyes. Even when one is speaking, one should continue to listen with eyes. Secondly, avoid trying to think of an answer. It has been observed that physicians interrupt patients within 23 seconds as they try to explain their problems.⁸ Be conscious of this. When a patient is speaking, focus on what he or she is saying rather than on what you are going to say next. Even if one disagrees with the patient, try to keep an open mind and allow the patient to finish his or her thoughts before one jumps in. Thirdly, try to eliminate distractions. Time constraints and pressures are often unavoidable, but they should not compromise patient care. Avoid reading a chart or talking on a telephone when a patient is speaking. Try to organize your staff and solicit their help in limiting such distractions during face-to-face encounters. Fourthly, always be respectful. The doctor and the patient have the same objective: to find a solution to the patient's problem. Without being judgmental, listen to identify the patient's agenda or imminent need. It is possible that this person believes no one cares about him or her, so listen with a sense of caring. Try to develop a friendly rapport with the patient and address the concerns, as this will help the patient to be more open and trusting. Lastly, do pay attention to vocal inflections. The tone of a person's voice can often tell more than his or her words. It may suggest that the person struggles with anger or depression, or it may point to a physical problem. Often when there is a discrepancy between what is being said and how it is being said this requires further 'conversation' and probing.⁹

Doctors have always been facing dilemmas which may have changed with changing times but the essence remains the same. In any given situation resources are always lesser than medical needs. Even in the West, inadequate numbers of physicians to provide the optimal needed care and rigorous regulations and industrialization are blamed for the escalating tensions between physicians and society. In developing countries the problems multiply many folds dearth of trained human resource and material resources. Equitable distribution of limited resources remains a huge challenge. Doctors are humans and like patients, they experience anxiety, seek wellness and wholeness, and increasingly struggle with work-life balance. In that backdrop, it can be all too easy for doctors to see patients through with detachment without greater personal involvement. The commodities that a doctor has to struggle with are restraints of time and personal energy. Entering into a conversation and developing rapport is the essence of medicine. Riding on such a relationship, one discovers the moment of 'communion' where a patient starts trusting the physician and opens heart to him.¹⁰

As a medical student, one learns anatomy and physiology. As a trainee one learns how to diagnose medical problems. As a physician, one must learn how to listen better. Listening helps one to engage fully with patients, make better decisions and ultimately provide better patient care.

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