

## Extraordinary Physicians

### Dr.-Patient Communication

Physicians who are aware of how their actions affect others are more effective practitioners. This requires empathy and cultural sensitivity. Unfortunately, research suggests that physicians grow more cynical and self-protective in their attitudes toward patients, particularly as the training years unfold (1,2).

### An Empathy Checklist

A recent article in *Academic Medicine* summarized key lessons about physician empathy learned from twelve outstanding physician-teachers (3). Use their suggestions as a behavioral self-assessment.

- Practice putting yourself in the patient's shoes.
- Assume the stance of servant, and "stay closer to the patient's heart than to their face."
- Look for reasons behind a patient's problematic behavior
- Pay close attention to the patient's nonverbal cues and feelings
- Get to know each patient as a person
- Avoid making assumptions about the patient based on race, ethnicity, gender, culture, socioeconomic status, or even past encounters

These last two items require cultural competence.

### Cultural Competence

Cultural competence is the ability to understand and work with patients whose beliefs, values, and histories are significantly different from your own (4). In our culturally diverse medical workplace, failing to pay attention to cultural differences can lead to patient alienation, misdiagnosis, and poor patient adherence.

In some cases, cultural competence requires language skills. More often, it requires an attitude of curiosity, acceptance, and warmth that will lead you to acquire specific knowledge about your patient.

A recent study reported the findings from focus groups that explored the issue of what it takes to be a culturally competent physician (Shapiro et al, 2002). Here's what patients themselves had to say:

- Don't make assumptions about the patient based on appearance or surname
- Listen carefully to the patient
- Take the patient seriously and acknowledge that the patient has expertise about his or her own body
- Give clear, complete, step-by-step explanations
- Question the patient thoroughly and probe their symptoms
- Become familiar with specific cultural health beliefs and folk remedies, and, where appropriate, incorporate them into treatment recommendations
- Show a desire to connect with the patient, even if a language or lifestyle barrier exists
- Show respect, warmth, and a caring attitude
- If a language barrier exists, use an interpreter, try to learn at least rudimentary phrases in the patient's language, and have patience with communication difficulties
- Confirm patient understanding and agreement before proceeding

Perhaps it stems naturally from caring, respectful, and inquisitive attitudes. Perhaps it results from cumulative experiences with a diverse patient population or from a learned set of communication skills. However it develops, cultural competence is an essential tool in the arsenal of any exceptional physician.

1. Davis M. (1999). *Hosp Med*, 60, 435-9.
2. Wipf et al. (1995). *Acad Med*, 70, 591-6.
3. Shapiro J. (2002). *Acad Med*, 77(4), 323-328.
4. Rothschild S. (1998). *DM*, 44, 298-319.
5. Shapiro J., et al. (2002). *Med Educ*, 36, 749-59.