



The anatomy of language in healthcare

Nonverbal and verbal communication is essential to ensure patient satisfaction and safety.

Fatima Abbas | Dec 08, 2022

In a single day healthcare professionals communicate with peers and patients from varying cultural, social, and educational platforms. Fourteen studies reviewed in the Oman Medical Journal highlighted that communication between patients and medical providers is at the heart of effective healthcare.

Seven of the studies, however, examined the relationship between language barriers and patient satisfaction, as well as the effects of language barriers on healthcare provider and patient satisfaction, healthcare provider satisfaction, and the cost and quality of interpretation services, as well as online translation tools.

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The results of studies highlighted incorrect diagnoses and treatments may be administered due to language differences between patient and doctors. In Norway, medical professionals claimed that between 36 per cent and 43 per cent of the patients who do not speak the native language had difficulty being understood, necessitating the need of interpreters. In fact, 37 per cent of doctors said they believed that patients withhold certain information due to language barriers.

In addition, language issues made it difficult for South African nurses working in Saudi Arabia to communicate with patients, their families, and nurses from other nations. In another study titled 'Nurse-patient/visitor communication in the emergency department', a staggering 94.3 per cent of nurses said that being able to communicate with patients in their language was very important for their work environment.

Delivery and tone in effective communication between patients and HCPs

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Ted Lapekas, a US-based accent and pronunciation specialist, commented on the importance of not only ensuring communication is clear and coherent but also establishing an appropriate tone. "Clear communication is essential for healthcare professionals. They are perceived as experts and their advice is followed by the patients they care for. If their patients do not accurately understand the advice, problems will ensue. Often, we as patients nod consent to what a doctor says even when we don't fully understand him/her.

Proper delivery is even more crucial than proper pronunciation. As native speakers we listen to the "music" of the language: the pauses and stressed words are more key to our understanding than the word's pronunciation. Even if the speaker gets all the words correct but delivers it with unfamiliar "music" the native speaker will miss the correct meaning," he explained.

Research published in PMC by author Disa A. Sauter conveys that most of our emotional communication is done nonverbally through facial expressions, gaze, gesture, posture, and tone of voice. Verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication as well as empathy are known to have an important impact on the medical encounter. To correlate, the National Healthcare Communication Programme states that a patients' body language conveys a range of emotions, and 'instead of taking the patient's spoken comments at face value', being aware of their nonverbal signs may allow specialists to delve a little further.

Importance of empathy and nonverbal communication

Several other studies, such as 'Effects of empathic and positive communication in healthcare consultations: a systematic review and meta-analysis' also underlines that empathy and positive communication might also improve patient outcomes. In addition, the British Journal of General Practice emphasises that non-verbal communication is vital in interactions between doctors and patients and plays a significant role throughout the medical interview. Nonverbal communication aids in relationship development, provides hints to unsaid worries and feelings, and supports or contradicts our verbal comments.

"As humans, we take in information with our five senses. To be believable, a message must be delivered with the proper facial expression, tone of voice, and in a way we can readily understand. The same message delivered incorrectly can be taken as a joke, or sarcasm, or as something not to be taken seriously," said Lapekas when asked about how body language is as important as the vocabulary professionals use.

According to Implications of Language Barriers for Healthcare: A Systematic Review, language barriers are responsible for reducing the satisfaction of medical providers and patients, as well as the quality of healthcare delivery and patient safety. Patient safety depends critically on communication between medical professionals, personnel, and patients. Through education and awareness, effective communication skills can be taught and strengthened.

As we steer in the direction of improving patient safety and increasing patient satisfaction, enhancing communication will play a big role.

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