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Editorial

Listening skills for doctors

Doctors spend considerable time in communicating with patients in their clinical practice. Communication with patients is important in history taking, explaining the diagnosis, obtaining informed consent, health education etc. Therefore, good communication skills are of utmost importance to doctors. There are two components in verbal communication; talking and listening. When communicate, one must pay equal attention to both these aspects. Listening skills of doctors are often questioned. Therefore, in this editorial we intend to stress the importance of listening skills for doctors. Listening or '**active listening**' plays a very important role in communication. Active listening is an art that has to be mastered. It involves many aspects such as being attentive during the conversation, ability to get the patient to talk freely, getting clarifications on what the patient said, being reflective of what the patient said, restating and summarising what the patient said from time to time and having the correct body language. Getting clarifications, restating what the patient said and summarising from time to time will make sure that you understand what the patient says correctly.

When obtaining information the doctor can use either open or close ended questions. It is preferable to use open questions (e.g. Can you explain me what happened to you when you took aspirin?) over close ended questions (e.g. Are you allergic to aspirin?). If the patient does not know the meaning of allergy he may say yes to even gastric irritation induced by aspirin whereas if he explains what happened when he took aspirin you may get the correct picture. Open questions tend to yield more information but the patient may consume more time. You may feel that it is not practical to use open questions in a busy clinic or a quick ward round because of the constraints on time. But we must always keep in mind that patients will open up and discuss freely when we ask open questions as opposed to close ended, leading questions. With practice, one can use open questions (together with appropriate use of leading questions) to obtain information from patients without loosing time. Better listening skills of doctors will definitely improve the patient-satisfaction.

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