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Shedding New Light on Doctor-Patient Communications



Charlene Prounis

*Co-President
Flashpoint Medica
New York City*

As health care costs escalate and the population ages, physicians are under increasing pressure to help patients live longer, healthier lives. They have some help. Since the 1960s, pharmaceutical companies have developed more than 780 new medications, and average life expectancy has increased by seven years. However, a recent *Wall Street Journal* article (March 9, 2005) revealed that only about 50% of patients fully comply with their doctor's medication prescriptions. Surprisingly, even among patients with diseases that are presumed to be fatal if untreated, such as human immunodeficiency virus and cancer, a large percentage fail to adhere with their therapeutic regimen, in spite of the vital need to do so.

Reasons for opting out of treatment vary: Nearly one-half of patients believe they do not need prescribed medications, whereas others are apathetic, financially troubled, or concerned about adverse events. In spite of the millions of dollars spent on patient compliance, researchers estimate that more than one-third of patients never fill a first prescription, much less stay on their medication for an entire year.

Recent research, however, points to a gap in the communications process. Studies indicate that 50% of patients immediately forget the conversations that they have during visits with doctors. Moreover, only 35% get instructions on how to take their medications. In light of these facts, marketing professionals are rethinking their strategies by focusing their communication efforts on the interaction between doctors and patients—a critical space in time known as the doctor-patient encounter (DPE).

The Bayer Institute for Health Care Communication of New Haven, Connecticut, posits that the essential elements of communication that should be part of the DPE, include:

- Building a relationship
- Opening the discussion
- Gathering information

- Understanding the patient's perspective
- Sharing information
- Reaching an agreement
- Providing closure

At face value, these elements are so fundamental that even discussing them may seem too obvious. Of course, doctors know they need to behave compassionately and communicate clearly and effectively. This, however, is not the norm. In fact, the margin of error is so monumental that the DPE has become a major focus for addressing the underlying problem that threatens patients' health.

The evidence base to support enhancing the DPE is broad, but one fact stands out: Research definitively shows that the number 1 predictor of adherence is a patient's sense that his or her doctor cares about him or her as a person. This is known as the therapeutic alliance.

The key to improving health care outcomes, saving money, and improving patient and physician satisfaction is to establish the therapeutic alliance early to build a stronger foundation for compliance and persistency.

How can the essential elements of communication increase follow-through and ultimately increase therapeutic adherence and brand persistence?

The elements of communication are multidimensional, incorporating body language, verbal communication, and other subtle aspects of interaction. Distilling these principles, along with other evidence-based strategies into specific communication programs, can be very effective. They may include targeted question-and-answer programs for doctors and patients, "one-minute" retention enhancers, and specially designed brochures for patients to read in the waiting room in preparation for their appointment. Additionally, integrating various strategies into programs customized for specific therapeutic areas and brands can help increase brand loyalty and foster a sense of good will.

Patients who believe that they are understood, understand their doctors' instructions, and can see the connection between the recommended therapeutic regimen and a positive outcome, are more likely to be adherent. We in the industry need to focus on efforts to make this happen, yielding significant benefits for patients, for physicians, and for the health care industry as a whole.