

BOOK REVIEW

The Medical Interview: Mastering Skills for Clinical Practice. 3rd ed. By JOHN L. COULEHAN AND MARIAN R. BLOCK. Philadelphia, Pa: F.A. Davis; 1997. 287 pages. \$28.95.

Over the past 10 to 15 years, a growing body of research and educational literature on the techniques and skills of medical interviewing has emerged. The importance of communication skills in medicine and the central role of the medical interview in providing quality patient care now seem self-evident. These communication skills and the structural elements of the medical interview can be taught and evaluated during the preclinical and clinical phases of physician training. However, faculty responsible for teaching and assessing these skills remain in disagreement over the best educational structures and pedagogic approaches to ensure that teaching is digestible, retainable, and transferable to future clinical settings. John Coulehan and Marian Block's *The Medical Interview: Mastering Skills for Clinical Practice*, 3rd ed., may serve as a valuable tool for faculty charged with teaching the basics of medical interviewing.

Beginning medical students express enthusiasm for learning patient interviewing, but they are often simultaneously overwhelmed with requirements for acquiring fact-based knowledge. Simultaneously, they are engaged in a complicated socialization process that may serve to hinder the ability to empathize with patients. The tension between these factors is no more dramatic than in the preclinical years of medical school. Traditionally dominated by the basic sciences, this 2-year entrée to medicine commonly results in a "survival mode" response in which students' attention is directed to the most fundamental work that will get them through another day. It is often within this context that faculty are challenged with giving students their first introduction to basic medical interviewing and patient relationship skills. These basic skills form a critical foundation for a student's success in clinical clerkships and future medical practice.

Coulehan and Block's text answers this challenge in a well-grounded and instructive manner. It presents medical interviewing in meaningful and manageable segments accompanied by scientific and practical rationales, all within the clinical context. Writing for medical students beginning their clinical careers, Coulehan and Block systematically address a wide spectrum of principles and skills central to the medical interview and the patient-physician relationship.

The authors begin by describing interviewing as a clinical skill that merges the scientific perspective with the art of medicine. Subsequent chapters address empathic responses, structural and informational elements of the history, the medical

record and the written history, and more complicated patient interactions. The final chapters review the role of computers and questionnaires in data gathering, introduce aspects of clinical judgment, discuss patients' beliefs and values, and summarize techniques for patient education and negotiation.

Chapters in the text follow a logical and effective pattern, which begins with principles and concepts, followed by skills and advice, and are interspersed with sample transcripts and real-world clinical examples. These sample interactions bring skills and concepts to life, helping to operationalize abstract principles and aid in their application to clinical encounters. This approach provides a more genuine feel to material that can be rendered lifeless by an overreliance on theory and contrived examples.

The sample transcript segments presented in the text are almost exclusively drawn from the outpatient setting. For courses and clerkships at outpatient clinics, these examples will be accurate, helpful, and will reflect challenges students will most likely encounter as they learn. However, for those medical schools that primarily use an inpatient setting for teaching initial interviewing skills, these examples are less easily translated and applied.

Although the sample transcripts are well placed and valuable, inevitably one loses the nonverbal dimensions of the interaction. In a text format, accompanying intonations in voice, varying postures or gestures, and other nonverbal cues important to communication are missing. Thus, there is a risk of misinterpretation. The authors address this shortcoming at times by providing some insight into nonverbal aspects of the interaction. This is a useful and appropriate way to compensate for the limitations of text.

Each chapter ends with a practical summary of key content, with useful references and suggested readings provided. These summaries cut to the essence of sometimes dense and information-laden chapters and should be particularly helpful for beginning students who might get lost in the details.

In addition to core skills, Coulehan and Block provide guidance on specialized interviewing situations and more challenging encounters. Pediatric and geriatric interviewing are reviewed with related key concepts presented in a precise and practical manner. This section is brief, however, and supplemental readings augmenting this chapter would be worthwhile. Other special concerns addressed in the text include difficult interactional styles, somatization, giving bad news, and dealing with strong emotions in an interview.

A chapter on interviewing and patient relationship issues in the primary care setting provides concrete solutions to common problems such as limited time, too many patient problems, and conflicting agendas. Managed care, preventive care, and malpractice concerns are also addressed.

This book provides a broad overview and specific examples of clinical skills and challenges from real physician-patient interactions, written in a voice that will resonate with medical students. Coulehan and Block have constructed a valuable resource for students and teachers of medical interviewing, providing thoughtful explanation and elucidation of not only basic skills and their application, but also more complex skills, all within a practical clinical context.—**CATHERINE DUBÉ, EDD**, Brown University School of Medicine and Rhode Island Hospital, Providence, RI

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