

# NEWS CAPSULE

## PRACTICE BUILDERS...

### **RECUPERATE = GET WELL** *and Other Patient Communication Tips*

By: Polly Geller



The way you communicate can improve patients' following directions, enhance disease management, and decrease recovery time. The words you use and the culture of your practice can facilitate patient understanding and trust. *90 million Americans cannot adequately understand basic health information.\** Some of them are your patients. The statistics sound daunting, but a few basic tips will help you enhance your patients' health care experiences.

Keep it simple; keep it understandable. *Embolism or clot; cerebral hemorrhage or stroke; coronary thrombosis or heart attack?* You know the medical terms, but do they? Many people lack basic health information and aren't familiar with medical terms. Use everyday words rather than clinical words. Help them to follow your directions. Pain killer instead of analgesic; bruise instead of contusion; cut or tear for laceration.

The three-minute difference: *Primary care physicians who have never had a malpractice claim against them spend an average of 18 minutes per patient on routine visits vs. 15 minutes by physicians who have been the target of malpractice liability claims.\*\** Take those three minutes to speak more slowly, use examples to illustrate, repeat or rephrase information. Use shorter sentences. Invite questions.

English as a second language, advanced age or limited education are potential barriers to effective patient treatment and communication. How do your patients wish to be addressed? Elderly patients may be more formal than you; they may prefer being called Mr. or Mrs. At 80, my mother had a problem with her much younger physician using her first name. She couldn't and wouldn't tell him - happily he figured it out. Ask and then pronounce your patients' names correctly. Ask the patient how they feel about including an English-speaking family member to the office visit. Whether your patient understands English or not, address them directly.

The foreign-speaking or elderly patient may not fully understand their health situation and treatment. Repeat information and instructions. Download materials in other languages when available, e.g., the American Heart Association provides material in Spanish. Your staff can help by assisting these patients in filling out medical forms.

Your staff represents you and should speak in your name. "The doctor suggests you bring in any questions and we'll be happy to go over them." Ask your front desk person or nurse to explain to new patients what is needed for the visit, especially for the first visit, tests and procedures. Ask the new patient to bring in a list of their medications or the actual medications. Your nurse or office staff should be aware if the patient needs help when they arrive at the office. Make a follow-up call to the new patient or ask the staff to call in your name. Consider a follow-up letter.

Find out which staff members speak another language and tell your patients. Post this information on your office, on your website, in your brochures.

Have handout materials you want your patients to read, and give those materials to them. Don't count on their picking up the glossy 4-color brochures in the waiting room. Treatment and health care instructions can be on your letterhead. Personalize it with a handwritten or printed note. Bold or underline details.

In summary, keep your communications simple and understandable. Develop an open-minded approach to your physician/patient relationships. Encourage your staff to reach out to patients. By recognizing and addressing your patients' needs and differences, you will build trusting relationships and increase positive physician/patient healthcare experiences.

*\*National Center for Education Statistics*

*\*\*Journal of the American Medical Association article on physician/patient communication by Drs. Levinson, Roter, Mullooly, Dull and Frankel.*

*The author is president of Geller, Grace & Associates, a Stamford-based healthcare public relations firm. She received the Business Marketing Association's Star Award for Excellence in Marketing Communications. Polly would be happy to provide you with a list of familiar, everyday medical, rather than clinical, terms for your use. To obtain this list contact: and can be reached at PGellerGrace@att.net. Polly Geller is a Board Member of Public Relations Society of America, Fairfield/Westchester Chapter.*

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