Foreword

Improving Our Communication Skills: More Than We Know

Physician-patient communication, framed as a set of skills that lie at the core of medical practice, is different from other skill sets that clinicians must master. Why? Because we assume we already know how to communicate. What is there to learn?

We humbly enter, as medical students, our physical diagnosis course, or, as experienced practitioners, our point-of-care ultrasound course. We freely admit we are novices at detecting a third heart sound or identifying a pleural infusion. Nothing to be ashamed of here, and nothing to unlearn.

Communication is different. We communicated before we became doctors and nurses, and we continue to communicate when our office hours end. What more, we may ask, do we need to learn about communication in medical practice? I say, more than we know.

I came to this realization, and am so enthusiastic about this particular issue of Medical Clinics of North America, because I have made almost all the mistakes. I have missed gaining insight into my patients’ perspectives; failed to appreciate nonadherence, or addressed it skillfully when I have appreciated it; done a less-than-stellar job motivating behavioral change; stammered my way through delivering bad news, or avoided that discussion entirely; done a poor job of handling the angry or hostile patient; and procrastinated in establishing goals of care. In short, I have exemplified, hopefully more in the past than in the present, the rationale for taking seriously the specific and instrumental skills that are addressed by Guest Editor, Heather Hoffman, and her expert authors. Over the course of my career, I have come to appreciate that communication skills in medical practice depend upon, first, acknowledging that there’s a great deal to learn; second, that we are not as expert as we think we are; and finally, that communication skills pave the way for more effective patient outcomes.
So, dig in. Use this issue as a checklist to help you identify areas of strength and weakness, and try out the tools and techniques that the experts recommend. I believe this will be time well spent.

Jack Ende, MD, MACP
The Schaeffer Professor of Medicine
Perelman School of Medicine of the University of Pennsylvania
5033 West Gates Pavilion
3400 Spruce Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA

E-mail address:
jack.ende@pennmedicine.upenn.edu