

How to Talk with Your Doctor



“ Honor a physician with the honor due him for the use which ye may have of him: for the Lord hath created him. ”
Ecclesiasticus 38:1
(from the Apochrypha)*

I recently had the experience of having someone attempt to talk with a doctor and manage to convey all the wrong information. It was like each of them was speaking in a different language. What ended up in the medical record was bizarre.

Physicians, of course, have a jargon of their own, but most of them are able to translate what they are asking or telling into “lay” terms—heart attack, for example, instead of acute myocardial infarction. The problem lies in communication when the patient doesn’t feel well, possibly does not understand the question, or attempts to give an answer the patient thinks the doctor wants. Some patients “rattle on” about extraneous things that are not pertinent to the problem at hand. Doctor visits are not social occasions.

Many questions asked of any patient in a doctor’s office, clinic or in the hospital are repetitious. How many times, one wonders, do I have to tell them I am allergic to penicillin? It should be written on the chart ten thousand times. True, but it only takes one slip to either leave it off an important piece of paper OR to translate the allergy into something else instead. In today’s medical field, stuff is stored on computers and transmitted electronically and I certainly don’t need to tell you how things get lost in cyberspace or end up in the wrong place entirely. Computerization of medical records has solved a lot of problems (almost anyone can read the computer screen—no handwriting there!), but the potential for grievous error still exists.



In this recent experience it would have been far better if the patient had an advocate to help with the questioning. When a loved one is ill, try and stay close—listen to the questions the doctor is asking and interrupt if you feel the answers are not correct.

Remember to keep a record of allergies, medications currently taken (including anything over-the-counter), previous medications that did or did not work, and a list of other medical conditions, including surgeries all the way back to that tonsillectomy you had when you were five.

Finally, no one is going to think you stupid if you don’t understand something. One trick is to say, “What I heard you say was...” and then repeat what you think you heard. Repeat instructions out loud, write things down, and verify anything that is confusing.

The older we get, the more likely we are to need medical assistance. Doctors and nurses are busy people and need all the help they can get from their patients. You can do your part by using good communication skills.

* Obviously not politically correct. In 2006 many physicians are women!