



Communication process and psychological aspects of communication in healthcare

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Abstract

The rapid technological advancement of modern civilization, along with the influence of media and social networks, has significantly impacted the style, manner, and quality of communication at all levels of society in everyday life, and therefore, also within healthcare institutions. Successful communication between healthcare professionals and patients is a prerequisite for successful treatment, given that human life is based on relationships with others, and these relationships depend directly on communication. Effective communication plays a crucial role in healthcare, influencing patient satisfaction, adherence to therapy, and the overall outcome of healthcare. This review paper explores the complex interaction between the communication process and psychological dimensions within the healthcare system, delving into the multifaceted nature of healthcare communication, and highlighting the importance of understanding the psychological foundations for establishing successful interactions between doctors and patients.

Keywords: communication, healthcare, process, patient, research.

1. Introduction

The technological development of modern civilization, the influence of media, and the emergence and expansion of social networks during the last decade have had an impact on the quality of communication in general, at all social levels, and particularly in healthcare systems across Serbia, Europe, and the world. In this context, it's important to consider the seismic changes in human functioning and survival during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which most notably affected the functioning of healthcare systems worldwide, their mutual collaboration and communication, as well as communication within each system individually. The changes occurring in the societal system and culture of a society entail changes in institutional communication. In this context, it can be said that the communication between doctors and patients has undergone significant transformation in the last few decades (Heritage, 2005).

Communication is a highly dynamic process influenced by psychological components on both verbal and non-verbal levels. It involves the exchange of information or messages between a sender and a receiver, who alternately change or switch their roles in this exchange process. Some authors (Chichirez & Purcărea, 2018; Butow & Hoque, 2020) add a third category to this dyad, the so-called paraverbal, which is expressed through accompanying vocal characteristics of words, such as intonation, voice inflection, tone, rhythm, verbal flow, and the like. In the context of nonverbal communication or human nonverbal patterns, data indicates that about 10,000 different facial expressions can be elicited by using 43 facial muscles at any given moment measured in milliseconds (Ekman, P., & Friesen, W. V., 1978, according to Butow & Hoque, 2020).

2. Communication in life and communication in healthcare

It can be said that human life is based on communication, as it's a basic human need to connect with loved ones and others, to convey desires, thoughts, intentions, demands, and the like through communication, thereby fulfilling physical, emotional, and psychological needs. Some studies indicate that a person spends 75% of their life communicating (Tubbs, 2010, according to Marojević-Glibo and Topić-Stipić, 2019). The method and manner of message transmission influence

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the efficiency of communication, and personal appearance and every form of behavior, if noticed, constitute signals, signs, or messages to which another person responds. Communication in the healthcare system is crucial for any society, as it involves various forms of interactions among all participants in that system: patients, doctors, all members of the medical team among themselves, with the patient's family members, but also on a much broader scale – with authorities, media, patient associations, insurance and pharmaceutical companies, and the public as a whole. Communication between patients and professionals, as the core of healthcare, can be a significant factor in accurate diagnosis, promoting patient-centered treatment, improving clinical outcomes, reducing the number of medical errors, adhering to therapies, ensuring safety, and more. Many studies in this field emphasize the significance of empathetic and positive communication that can be learned (Howick et al., 2018).

Successful diagnosis and treatment processes are determined by the communication between doctors and patients, specifically by the quality of the established relationship between them (Travaline et al., 2005) in patient-oriented medicine rather than disease-oriented medicine. The way of interacting with users of medical and support staff within an organization providing healthcare services also determines its value. Training of medical personnel in the field of diagnosis and treatment is crucial, but the human factor plays an essential role in the fact that the success of therapy in over 40% of cases depends on the quality of the doctor-patient relationship (Ahmed et al., 2013). Communication is the most dominant skill of a successful physician (Braš and Đorđević, 2011), and we could even say the most important one. Among the many visible but subjective parameters by which it can be evaluated, a quantifiable objective measure is the number of complaints about the work of doctors and medical staff in each healthcare institution. Numerous studies conducted in the field of medical services confirm that this interaction is relevant for patient satisfaction, the perception of the quality of provided medical services, and consequently, for the improvement of the medical institution's performance (Boudreaux et al., 2003). The fact that the task of a doctor is not easy is highlighted by the need for psychological sensitivity and education in addition to the necessary medical knowledge required for the treatment and preservation of each patient's life. A doctor must approach each patient idiosyncratically and respect their individuality by adapting communication to them personally and to the members of their family. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the quality of communication is influenced by factors such as the event and situational context, previously formed ideas, and the method of information transmission or message in the communication chain (Marojević-Glibo and Topić-Stipić, 2019). Additionally, the impact of stress on the patient needs to be considered, as it complicates the interaction. Prolonged exposure to stress leads the body to adapt to it, as there is an "adaptation to stress" without recovery or return to the pre-stress state (Kostić, 2017).

Communication between healthcare professionals and patients, as a form of social communication, implies mutual respect for personality traits through social interaction and empathetic bonding (Brkljačić, 2013). It gains further significance when we consider the fact that there is a connection between the body and the psyche, meaning that organic illnesses are intertwined with emotions and the mind. Communication between doctors and patients often takes place on subtle intellectual and emotional levels. These complex relationships demand continuous education and improvement for medical staff as well as healthcare institution management. One of these methods is the Balint method of education (Balint groups), which is integrated into medical studies, general medicine specialization, and continuous medical education around the world. The purpose of this method is to educate healthcare professionals about the intricate interactions between doctors and patients through psychological training and development. This involves changing perceptions and attitudes toward one's own and others' reactions and emotions. Enhancing and improving communication should be a priority for modern healthcare teams. Just as other industries have recognized this, the healthcare sector should also overcome obstacles to effective communication within its framework. These obstacles can be psychological, educational, or organizational in nature (Weller et al., 2014).

3. Patients and professionals in a two-way communication process

Medical staff, hospital environments, medical equipment, and patient technologies do not resemble a home atmosphere. On the contrary, they can sometimes represent an additional burdensome and intimidating factor for the patient, which can impact their condition, the severity of the illness, and sometimes even the implementation of therapeutic procedures. On the other hand, unrecognized or neglected psychological and emotional aspects of illness are often crucial to the course and outcome of treatment. Therefore, it is important that the professional education of doctors encompasses not only the biomedical aspects of treatment but also components related to recognizing patients' psychosomatic difficulties. Regarding the roles of doctors and patients, and the perception of their apparent inequality, there is a common belief in the superior, high status of doctors as glorified individuals with multiple qualities compared to the patient. The doctor is associated with authority and monopoly, while the patient's role is determined by vulnerability – a strong need for support in resolving health problems – and the physical and mental suffering that comes with illness, which is inherently a source of insecurity (Chichirez&Purcărea, 2018). The doctor-patient relationship can be considered on three levels based on the degree of involvement of each party: activity-passivity, where the doctor is active; management-collaboration, where the patient collaboratively respects medical advice; and mutual participation, through which the doctor motivates and guides the patient to take personal responsibility for their health, thus helping themselves (Parsons, 1975).

The psychological aspects of communication in healthcare relate to the emotional and cognitive reactions of patients and healthcare professionals during communication. Patients often experience anxiety, fear, and uncertainty during medical examinations and treatments. Healthcare professionals face challenges in interpreting patients' emotional signals to provide support and understanding. Understanding these psychological aspects helps build trust and effective communication. Empathy, clear expression, adaptability, and listening skills are factors that support efficient communication. On the other hand, time constraints, insufficient patient understanding, and a lack of communication skills can hinder the communication process. In delicate situations, such as those common in the treatment process of oncology patients, communication quality is crucial. Patients, in a state of stress and their own insecurity, with significantly reduced psychological capacity and the ability to react adequately, often receive difficult and uncomfortable information. They must make crucial life decisions based on this information. Adapting to new and current life circumstances is one of the most important mechanisms used for survival, recovery, and the reestablishment of psychophysical balance (Kostić, 2022). Considering that patients, in most cases, are not medically educated, it is vital for them to fully understand their diagnosis, prognosis, and the course of their current health condition and treatment. They need to have the psychological capacity to tolerate uncertainty and make informed decisions about their treatment. The importance of a quality relationship with the doctor and other healthcare professionals is experientially confirmed by examples of trust-filled relationships where patients trust the doctor's expertise. Only then can they appropriately accept the diagnosis and advice that will positively influence the course and outcome of treatment and their overall health status. Coping mechanisms, or strategies for dealing with stress, involve a range of behaviors that are fundamentally based on an individual's response to stress, either by "fighting" or "fleeing" (Kostić, 2022). This entails a complex yet flexible use of cognitive, social, and behavioral components in situations that individuals perceive as ambiguous, unpredictable, or stressful (Bandura, 1981, as cited in: Kostić, 2020).

Every individual's realization of being sick or having a severe or incurable disease evokes disbelief, fear, apprehension, sadness, worry, a sense of helplessness, and a range of negative emotions. In this sense, quality communication between patients and healthcare professionals in every medical institution is of crucial importance, as it can significantly reduce the intensity of these patient emotions. Effective communication is a determinant of the patient's understanding of their own health condition, cooperation with the doctor during treatment and recovery, and is considered a key factor in providing quality medical care. On the other hand, it should be characterized by empathy as a quality through which the doctor provides adequate support and shows respect for the patient by understanding their concerns, fears, and expectations. This should be done using clear and understandable vocabulary when communicating the diagnosis, treatment, and care instructions, as technical or complex medical terms can increase anxiety and fear in patients. Careful listening to the patient and understanding symptoms, medical history, and asking open-ended questions to encourage the patient, as well as providing sufficient information about the diagnosis and all treatment and healthcare options, should be imperative in communication by a healthcare professional. It is also essential that every patient has complete freedom to ask questions about anything that burdens them regarding their current health status, as this is the only way they can reduce anxiety and fear and feel included and supported in the healing or recovery process.

4. Conclusion

The human element in healthcare is crucial and plays a significant role in the overall patient experience and outcomes. Organizations that provide health services, medical personnel, and auxiliaries are essential components of the healthcare system and contribute to the holistic patient experience. The patient-doctor relationship is vital to the success of therapy. A strong and trusting relationship between a patient and their healthcare provider can lead to better communication, improved adherence to treatment plans, and overall better health outcomes. Medical personnel, including doctors, nurses, and administrative staff, need to have effective communication skills and show empathy towards patients. Clear and compassionate communication helps patients understand their conditions, treatments, and options, reducing anxiety and fostering a more positive experience. The expertise and skill of medical personnel directly impact the quality of care patients receive. Well-trained doctors and nurses can provide accurate diagnoses, effective treatments, and personalized care plans tailored to individual patient needs. Patient-centered care places the patient's preferences, values, and needs at the forefront. Organizations that prioritize patient-centered care tend to have higher patient satisfaction rates and better health outcomes. Effective collaboration among medical teams, administrative staff, and auxiliary personnel ensures smooth operations within healthcare organizations. Coordinated efforts result in streamlined patient care processes, reduced wait times, and improved patient flow. Auxiliaries like administrative staff and security guards contribute to creating a safe and supportive healthcare environment. Administrative staff handle appointments, paperwork, and logistics, while security personnel ensure patient safety and confidentiality. Healthcare organizations that recognize the importance of the human component often adopt a holistic approach to patient care. This approach considers not only medical treatments but also the emotional, psychological, and social aspects of a patient's well-being. The reputation of a healthcare organization is closely tied to the experiences patients have with its personnel. Positive patient experiences lead to trust, word-of-mouth recommendations, and a strong brand reputation. The interaction between patients and healthcare personnel significantly impacts patient satisfaction scores. Higher patient satisfaction is associated with better compliance, improved health outcomes, and increased loyalty to the healthcare provider. Healthcare organizations should invest in ongoing training and development for their personnel to keep up with medical advancements, communication techniques, and patient care best practices. This ensures that the human component remains effective and up-to-date. In

conclusion, the human element in healthcare is a critical factor in delivering successful patient outcomes and a positive overall experience. Organizations that value and invest in their medical personnel, auxiliary staff, and patient-doctor relationships contribute significantly to the value they offer in the healthcare market.

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