



Barbara McLaughlin

Barbara's expertise is HOW TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY with a focus on Healthcare. A lot of the information presented to patients is not remembered, understood or complied to.

Barbara's life's passion is to help patients navigate and comprehend the healthcare world so they are not so frightened and upset by the mere process.

Barbara worked with Smart Source to create a series of products and services whose primary function is to educate and communicate to the patients. Visit our website at www.hand-holder.com and see how we meet this challenge. Then send us your comments and ideas so you too can help take care of everyone and feel good about your life every day!

Patient Communications 101

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Communication has always been one of society's most important behaviors. It is the way we build on great ideas and improve our lives. We have evolved from pictograms on cave walls to a variety of communication methodologies. We crave and expect it. Try asking someone to stay off Social Media for one day to quantify our need for communication.

Healthcare Communication is more essential to our survival than almost any other form of communication. It is how we improve our quality of life and avoid repeating mistakes of the past. Consider the role of communication for smoking cessation or encouraging a healthy diet. Communication is used to manage how we treat each other in times of stress, illness, injury, and confusion (when we are the most vulnerable).

Yet, we seem to make little provision for those among us who struggle to communicate in the complex world of medicine. Many English-speaking citizens struggle to understand health information not to mention those for whom English is a second language. In fact, Health and Human Services requires us to communicate critical medical information in a patient's language of choice (ref: to www.lep.gov).

"Only 12% of adults have proficient health literacy", according to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy. In other words, nearly nine out of ten adults may lack



the skills needed to manage their health and prevent disease. Fourteen percent of adults (30 million people) have below basic health literacy. These adults are more likely to report their health as poor (42%) and are more likely to lack health insurance (28%) than adults with proficient health literacy.*

As caring, committed, and concerned healthcare professionals, the onus is on us to communicate critical medical information in a way that patients understand. It is our responsibility to facilitate easy access to information to influence patient behavior, decrease the cost of healthcare, and improve the overall health of the population.

While this seems to be a fact everyone in healthcare understands, it is puzzling how poorly things are handled. We are talking about providing information patients need to understand while in a state of high emotional anxiety.

* ref: <https://nces.ed.gov/naal/index.asp>

To improve the patient communications, some questions to address include:

- Where do we start?
- What exactly do we need to do?
- What do patients really need and want?
- How much will this cost? And who will pay?
- Why can't they just do what we tell them?
- Isn't a reminder via phone call enough?
- How do we get patients to accept responsibility for their own health?

Here are a few pointers to get you started:

1. Begin at the beginning. Remember that software solutions are created for operations NOT to promote patient understanding.
2. People process information in different ways so we need to vary the methods in which we provide it to them.
3. When you can reach patients in a way they understand, you will find that they arrive on time, are properly prepared, and have the correct documentation and information.
4. Take a step back and view the situation from the patient's perspective. What would you want to know and when would you want to know it? How would you need to receive information for it to be effective?
5. Maximize the potential for understanding. Use clear, plain language and lots of photos, diagrams, and illustrations to try to help people with limited literacy skills. The operative term here is BRU - brief, relevant, useful.
6. Avoid extraneous information. Remove the "fluff" and long-winded sentences whether you are communicating on paper, electronically, by voice, video, etc. Use bullet points whenever possible.
7. Pay attention to what the documents look like. People decide within 30 seconds whether they will read or keep whatever you have given them. Use lots of color! We know that color can improve comprehension by as much as 72%. Fonts also matter; they are what helps people pay attention to the most important information. This is why newspapers have big headings in interesting type.
8. Make sure the information is accurate and consistent across the mediums you choose without removing what each specific doctor wants the patient to know. This may not be what your database software has built in for "standardized" instructions. Flexibility is key.
9. Transition your patients to EMR communications. No one likes to be forced to communicate in a specific way; take the banking industry as an example. Online banking has been in existence for quite a while but customers only migrated when the information format had been re-designed a great deal.
10. Improve your HCHAPS in tangible and measurable ways. Patients' most common complaints are about what that they did not know, what they did not understand, and when communication was poor (aka when they were educated on processes and procedures). Check the questions on HCHAPS; how many of them include "Did you know," "Did they explain," "Did you understand," or "Was it clear?" Your score is largely based on how well you communicate. For more information visit: <http://www.hcahpsonline.org/surveyinstrument.aspx>

One interesting question of note: "During your hospital stay, did you get information in writing about what symptoms or health problems to look out for after you left the hospital?"

As an industry, it is important that we share what works and what doesn't. What we do know is too much information overwhelms and scares people, too little information usually means they do not know how to comply, and irrelevant information causes confusion. Again, put yourself in their place. What would YOU want?

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