



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!

Patients, Technology and the EMR

Barbara K. McLaughlin
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The rapid trend toward technology in healthcare is both exciting and frightening to patients. New advances in science that can extend life and cure diseases are often accompanied by the perception of dehumanization when a person is sick or hurt. Everyone feels vulnerable when asking for help with physical and/or mental incapacitation imposed by forces beyond their control. Patients want to know how to process their thoughts and feelings as they struggle with their understanding of new technologies and procedures. Patients would rather have a medical professional explain things then to interpret what they might read for themselves in their Electronic Medical Record (EMR).

Patients are not able to process information when they are sick or hurt. When a diagnosis is delivered, a fog descends that impedes a patient's ability to understand and remember. Meanwhile, overburdened healthcare workers are struggling to keep up with the demand for their services and they are trying to remain patient



as they repeat the same, pertinent information to a patient or family member. As machines gurgle and squeak, all patients really want is for someone to sit quietly with them and hold their hand.

We all have a love/hate relationship with technology; we love it when it works and hate it when it doesn't. This is no different than the technology that is driving many healthcare advances and changes, although the fear factor plays a much bigger role when it comes to our bodies and health.

As we become more educated as a society, we can all understand the need for technology and the desire to automate routine tasks, but the longing and need for personal service and human touch seems to become more pronounced. How we take in and process information becomes more personal and clear.

“Don’t make me come to you for the information I need. If you want me to do something, you need to push the information to me and make it easy for me to understand.”

Add to this the complications of accessing information. Obtaining a medical record requires logging on to a computer, creating another username and password, and then navigating through the information to try to find what you need. And like all things electronic, if the information is not organized, labeled, and filtered, it is cumbersome to navigate. It also may be full of medicalese that is incomprehensible to patients. Often, in an effort to protect private health information, organizations put controls in place that further complicate the process. For example, the information technology group may impose expiration dates on the username or password thereby forcing patients to call in for help to access their own health information. Even if these expirations are 6 months or 12 months, it adds a complication few of us have patience for. And once we get there, the frustration is exacerbated if the data is not filtered or organized. Occasionally the information inside an electronic medical record (EMR) can frighten a patient. For example, once when viewing my own information, I saw a lab report that said, “CATASTROPHIC levels of D.” Panicked, I called my physician who told me my vitamin D count was low.

The lesson here is that communication is the secret sauce to patient compliance and comfort. And, the “secret” to the secret sauce is to make sure all communications are as personal and varied as the patients they are intended for. Standardization for the sake of expeditiousness can only take us so far. The value is for the information that is given to patients is specific to their body, their condition, their needs and capabilities, and their doctors’ instructions, and not driven solely by a computer program.

Besides illness, there are many other factors that can impede a patient’s ability to understand. Examples include emotional state, language barriers, literacy issues, personality issues, and financial issues. Assuming someone can put a note into an EMR and that a patient will access and understand it is not only ignorant, but also indifferent and potentially dangerous. To reach a patient, it is imperative that the healthcare provider understands their needs and capabilities in addition to their desires. If you cannot take the time to personally accomplish this, then you need to design a technological solution that takes all of the variances into consideration before reaching out to the patient so they get the information they need to behave in a way that promotes their health and safety as well as emotional well-being.

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