



How to Talk to Doctors

By Dr. Kathleen Begley, Book Author and Professional Speaker

Note to Readers: *This free e-newsletter, sent only upon request, comes from Dr. Kathleen Begley, owner of Write Company Plus communications training. She writes weekly on topics connected to business and personal success. Dr. Begley recently launched a new blog called "Meanderings to a Different Drummer." Click onto the website address at the end of this article to read her one-paragraph musings on politics, business, and anything else that strikes her fancy.*

While doing research for my training business, I recently ran across a hot-off-the-presses study saying that bad communication costs U.S. hospitals \$12 billion a year in readmittance, complaints, lawsuits, and other costs. The amount took my breath away, even though I personally have witnessed two huge blunders involving doctors speaking with patients.

The first involved me. When I was hospitalized in 2003 with severe abdominal pain, the physician insisted I had diverticulitis – a disease caused primarily by eating a low-fiber diet. Even though I repeatedly told the doctor I devoured huge amounts of grain, he refused to listen. I suffered for a year until another gastro-intestinal specialist correctly diagnosed my problem as a highly resistant bacterial growth.

My other encounter with horrific health-care communication involved a friend who was scheduled to have a cancer-related hysterectomy. Accompanying her to the pre-surgical appointment, I was flabbergasted when the doctor made it all-too-obvious that he had failed to review her chart before walking into the examination room. In what seemed to me to be the ultimate in impersonal and callous behavior, he said he could not recall her name.

The new study, conducted at the University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business, recommends that health-care workers need a great deal of improvement in communication. The researchers suggest a substantial investment in both computer systems and human training. While the staggering financial cost apparently is new information, the need for improved communication – especially involving conversations with patients -- by doctors, nurses, and others inside and outside the hospital setting has been a subject of concern for many years. Just take a look at these thoughts from a lawyer named Kathleen Daily Mock, expressed in a 2001 online article for Physicians News Digest called "Effective Clinician-Patient Communication."

"Communication matters. It's not rocket science, yet it is a concept routinely ignored in the education of clinicians (physicians). Patients know that communication matters, and it is often poor communication in the face of a bad outcome that initiates legal action by the patient-turned-plaintiff. Ineffective communication also often reduces the accuracy of a clinician's diagnosis. Indeed research shows that clinicians allow the patient only 18 seconds to present the story of their illness before interrupting. Additionally, the same research shows that only two percent of those patients ever get the opportunity to complete their story."

OK. So doctors, nurses, administrators, aides, technicians, orderlies, and other hospital workers would be well advised to change their behavior. But what can you and I do? How can laypeople improve our communication to ensure the best possible care from health-care providers? Here are some ideas from me and from a website entitled "Quackwatch" Your Guide to Quackery, Health Fraud and Intelligent Decisions." Despite the name of this Internet link, the patient protection group offers really sound tips:



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Recognize the most important fact. Health-care workers, particularly doctors, often are strong in hard science, not in soft interpersonal skills. If physicians had the communication powers of President Barack Obama or of TV food show host Rachel Ray, they probably would have gone into a different field. So be aware that many medical personnel, when confronted with long stories and strong emotion, are innately uncomfortable.

Help them help you. The best way to improve communication with health-care workers is to organize yourself in advance. Before every appointment or meeting, whenever possible, list your main symptoms, current medications, and relevant past history. Using your notes as a springboard, tell your provider first about the most important details. Remember that you're trying to provide unembellished facts, not to write a description-filled novel.

Focus on your nonverbal message. You've undoubtedly heard the saying "It's not what you say, but how you say it." Body language counts. The most significant thing you can do to ensure positive communication with anyone, including health-care workers, is to make and keep eye contact.

Take notes. If you're dealing with a diagnosis such as cancer or diabetes, your fear is likely to cloud your ability to gather and remember important information. So bring some paper, a laptop computer, an instant message device, a tape recorder, or even a video camera to capture critical conversations with health-care workers. Even in the best of times, human memory is notoriously faulty.

Invite a companion. During the stomach illness I suffered six years ago, I spent many days where I could hardly leave the bathroom. Because I was overwhelmed with frustration by the time I found a new physician, I asked my sister to accompany me to the guy's office. She calmly and coolly asked the right questions, and I got the right answer: a new antibiotic that cured me in less than a month. Diverticulitis never even came up.

Prove your trustworthiness. According to medical research, many patients lie. If you neglect to share your heavy alcohol intake with a doctor you're seeing about an enlarged liver, for example, you're delaying effective treatment. Your blood results are going to reveal your six daily martinis anyway, so you might as well come clean now. Ditto on taking your medication. If you fail to follow good direction, you're breaking the trust that is the foundation of good communication.

Act nice. Medical personnel face thousands of people a year under less than ideal circumstances. To feel better, many sick patients project their despair onto caregivers. Remember that doctors, nurses, and colleagues are human beings, too. As such, they can hardly be expected to remain 100 percent positive in face of continual negativity. My observations: smile and the doctor smiles with you; you get more with honey than with phlegm; to give an occasional gift is to receive better medical care.

Dr. Kathleen Begley has written seven books and gives corporate seminars on topics such as writing persuasively, presenting confidently, and managing positively. You can call her at 610-429-1562 or e-mail her at KBegley@writecompanyplus.com. Her new blog "Offline" is available by clicking the icon on the lower right of her homepage at www.writecompanyplus.com. She responds to everybody.