Effective communication is essential to providing quality patient care especially for pharmacy technicians, who engage in communication all day long. Strong communication skills behind the scenes with other healthcare professionals is as important as good customer service to enhance the customer experience. Key elements of effective communication include being respectful and professional, expressing empathy for others, engaging in active listening, and practicing good interpersonal skills. Another part of good communication is overcoming communication boundaries by recognizing differences in health literacy. In this activity, you will be provided with opportunities for self-reflection, application and growth.

Case 1
Mrs. Smith walks up to the pharmacy counter and is greeted by Technician A with a pleasant “Good morning, Mrs. Smith! Did you have a good time at your daughter’s wedding?” Mrs. Smith is pleased by Technician A’s cheerful attitude and how she remembered her daughter was married recently. “Thank you for asking, it was very beautiful,” responds Mrs. Smith. Technician A continues with, “We have your prescriptions all ready to go today. I can help you check out here.” Meanwhile, the phone rings and Technician B answers it. “Thank you for calling Pharmacy Drug my name is B, how may I help you?” It is a nurse from Dr. Jones’ office calling in a new order. Technician B listens to the order then repeats it back to the nurse and thanks her for calling. After hanging up the phone, Technician B begins to enter the prescription into the computer and realizes there may be an interaction between the new medication and one the patient is already taking. Technician B consults with the pharmacist about the interaction. The pharmacist decides the doctor should be alerted to the interaction, so the technician calls the office. The nurse is with another patient, so the technician leaves a message relaying the pertinent patient information and the nature of the problem. Later on, the nurse returns the call and notifies the pharmacy that the doctor decided to change the order.
to a medication that will not interact with the patient’s other medications. After entering the new order, Technician B discovers the new medication is not covered by the patient’s insurance plan. The technician must compose a letter to be faxed to the doctor’s office asking them to communicate with the insurance company.

Self Reflection
What types of communication were being performed in the scenario? What forms of communication might one encounter in a pharmacy? Who would be the individuals one might communicate with throughout the workday?

Many types of communication are performed almost simultaneously with many different consumers. Communication occurs with the patients, healthcare professionals, pharmacists, insurance companies and more throughout the day. Forms of communication include oral, written, telephone, electronic means, voicemail and fax.

Interpersonal skills are the tools used when interacting with others. Practicing good interpersonal skills are important in working in a team and also in providing good customer service. Interpersonal skills are also sometimes referred to as communication skills. These skills include verbal and non-verbal communication, listening, problem solving, decision-making, negotiation, and assertiveness. Maintaining a positive attitude is an important aspect of maintaining good interpersonal skills. Each of these ideas is expanded upon further within this monograph, because of the integral nature of interpersonal skills on our day-to-day communication.

Teamwork is crucial in healthcare. Although, each setting is different, learning to work with one another for the greater good of the patient is essential. All disciplines, pharmacy technician, pharmacist, prescriber, nurse, MOA, CNA, respiratory therapist, insurance company, patient and the list goes on, must communicate information back and forth efficiently and effectively. What strategies are employed to make this happen? Many forms of communication are utilized. Prescribers and other medical professionals see these documents; so it is important to assure professional documents for faxing and mailing are available. When filling out these documents, it is best to have them electronic so information can be typed in but if that is not possible, the information should be handwritten neatly and in concise words. There is no room for rambling and storytelling. When contacting a provider, it is imperative to have all pertinent information gathered prior to sending the communication or telephoning the office. Telephone etiquette is equally important. Answering the phone by introducing the place of employment, one’s name and a polite “how may I help?” is the most appropriate way to pick up the telephone. When placing someone on hold, always let the individual know he or she will be placed on hold and estimate a time that it will take to get back to the phone. Ending the phone conversation as politely as it began is another golden rule. Always end with goodbye. Last but not least, email and text messaging are becoming more popular and more widely accepted forms of communication. They have limitations, as do most forms of communication. Policies and procedures must exist in the workplace and one must know the ins and outs of these rules before use of either form of communication. (These rules are made to protect the patient’s private information.) All these forms of communication drive teamwork. Ensuring that communication is clear and concise allows for the next person on the team to provide information that ultimately helps the collective patient.
Non-verbal communication is often overlooked as an aspect of communication. Non-verbal communication cannot be imitated; it comes naturally to people in the course of conversation. Maintaining an open body position, making eye contact, actively listening and talking directly to the patient in a manner that is nonjudgmental. These are direct clues to the patient that the other party is listening to what they are asking or saying. (See Table 1) This makes the patient feel cared for and allows for respect to grow in a professional relationship. When arms are folded in front of the body (this is a closed body position), failure to acknowledge the patient with direct eye contact or displaying a negative attitude (such as rolling of the eyes or being gruff with the patient), communication can be an immediate turn-off with potential to quickly put an end to the professional relationship.

Table 1. Adapted from Authors: Jeanne Segal, Ph.D., Melinda Smith, M.A., Greg Boose, and Jaelline Jaffe, Ph.D. Last updated: May 2013. http://www.helpguide.org/mental/eq6_nonverbal_communication.htm Website accessed 8.2.2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facial expressions</th>
<th>Can tell a thousand stories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Body movements and posture</td>
<td>Perceived connotations of how one feels or whether there is an interest or lack of interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gestures</td>
<td>Often used to make a point, be careful of cultural differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eye contact</td>
<td>Assists in maintaining flow of conversation, gauges the interest of the other person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touch</td>
<td>Handshakes, pat on the back, remember appropriateness and cultural beliefs have an effect on this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space</td>
<td>Allow for proper personal space, may be some cultural beliefs that play into this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice</td>
<td>Tone of voice or inflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active Listening</td>
<td>Listening without interruption</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Good communication only exists with mutual respect. It is important to treat everyone with courtesy and kindness. The idea of treating others as one wants to be treated is not an innovative idea, but sometimes it is easy to forget how even the smallest of gestures can change a person’s attitude. Healthcare is a fast-paced environment with many healthcare professionals stressed for time and patience, but it is important to remember the entire team’s goal is quality care for patients. According to the Institute of Safe Medication Practices (ISMP), disrespectful behaviors chip away at communication and collaboration efforts, which can lead to poor patient care.

What does it mean to be respectful in the workplace? Respect means recognizing each healthcare team member as an individual and valuing the role each plays. Each healthcare team member brings strengths and expertise to the patient’s healthcare experience. Thus, allowing teamwork and collaboration to occur. There is no room for passive or aggressive personalities, only those that demonstrate genuine concern and care for the patient.

There are three behavior types to discuss in order to understand levels of respect: assertive, aggressive and nonassertive behaviors. The assertive behavior encourages recognition of opinions or differences that may exist. Aggressive behavior, on the other hand, negatively impacts relationships due to one party overpowering another. Nonassertive behaviors encourage the inappropriate behavior of others and may lead to dishonesty and intimidation. Assertive behaviors develop mutual respect between two parties. Aggressive behavior is usually seen as bullying, while nonaggressive behavior is visualized as the “doormat”. The assertive behavior is considered the most favorable in customer service related careers due to its ability to promote communication during conflict.

**Case 2**
The pharmacy has been waiting for a prescription clarification for a few days. The pharmacy technician answers the phone. The person on the other line identifies herself as a medical assistant from Dr. Jones’ office calling to clarify the prescription in question. The pharmacy technician curtly says, “It’s about time. The patient has been waiting for three days for this prescription.” The CMA apologizes and says that the office has been busy. She provides the information needed for the prescription. Before hanging up, the pharmacy technician retorts “Maybe, you can teach the prescribers in your office to write a legal prescription.”

**Self Reflection**
What disrespectful behaviors can you identify? How could the pharmacy technician have acted more respectfully? How do you think that the CMA feels after this conversation? What behavior type is the pharmacy technician exhibiting?

Scenarios, such as this, happen daily between various healthcare team members. ISMP’s national survey from 2003 reports 88% of its respondents encountered disrespectful language. It is important to remember that each healthcare professional plays a vital role in the patient’s healthcare. One negative event can severely slow the progression of each patient experience.

In healthcare, people may experience difficulties so empathy should be shown during these situations. Many people visit a pharmacy in pain or feeling ill. Empathy is an essential element of communication because it is critical in building trust and relationships. Pharmacy technicians want to maintain good relationships with patients to encourage...
pharmacy loyalty and to increase medication adherence.\(^1\) (see inset below for example) Being empathetic with others is different from feeling pity or being sympathetic. Sympathy means to feel sorry for another, while empathy is neutral and is more about understanding what the other person is going through. Being empathetic does not mean agreeing with another’s feelings, wanting to fix the problem or shifting the focus to oneself. In order to be truly empathetic, one must withhold judgment. One should be attentive to the other person, listen to their concerns, be aware of their feelings, and understand their needs.

**Empathy vs. Sympathy**

*This is the first time that you have seen Mr. K since his wife passed away. He apologizes for being late on his refills but he tells you that his wife had always handled the medicine. You look at him and smile and say it’s ok. You tell him you understand how it is when you have to learn how to do something new that you’ve never done before. (EMPATHY, validating that he has to learn something new and that you are willing to help him.)*

*This is the first time that you have seen Mr. K since his wife passed away. He apologizes for being late on his refills but he tells you that his wife had always handled the medicine. You grab his hand when he hands you his bottles for refills and tell him how sorry you are for the loss of his wife. (SYMPATHY, feeling sorry.)*

A critical factor in empathetic response is active listening. The active listening concept involves listening without interruption to the patient, summarizing and repeating back what was heard and then providing possible solutions.\(^2\) Listening is about more than just hearing what someone is saying; it is about understanding and responding to what has been said. In order to listen to someone, one needs to be fully attentive; try to minimize interruptions and distractions. Do not interrupt when another is talking and avoid mentally preparing arguments. Maintaining eye contact with the speaker, use open body language and show attentiveness to the speaker by simple gestures like nodding of the head. When the other person finishes speaking, it is essential to reflect on what has been said. Either repeat back or rephrase what was said. Ask questions to clarify or improve understanding. When asking questions avoid “yes-no” questions, but instead ask open-ended questions. Open-ended questions allow for better interaction. This must be done without judgment and personal opinions must be set aside when utilizing active listening. One must be completely clear that the possible solutions that are being provided fit for each particular patient and not oneself.

Determining a patient’s health literacy is an integral part of providing education to the patient. Health literacy is defined as the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.\(^3\) The US Department of Education’s National Assessment of Adult Literacy states that in 2003, 78 million adults have basic or below basic levels of health literacy. Health literacy not only regards written documents but also spoken and systematic communication. If the patient has poor health literacy, using complicated jargon or medical terms may present a barrier to proper education. Educating at a lower level than the patient’s health literacy level can intimidate the patient and deter requests for additional education or care. If the patient has high health literacy, not utilizing proper medical terminology can degrade the patient and be perceived as offensive. Over simplifying terminology for a patient may reflect poorly on the pharmacy technician’s credibility.

The Four Habits Model suggests open-ended questions at the start of a patient interview as one technique to determine health literacy level.\(^4\) In this instance, the patient talks extensively about their health information to gauge health literacy level and tailor information gathering.

Written literature should have six primary factors of readability: sensitivity to vocabulary; sentence length and structure; amount of information; page design and formatting; logical order and well-organized content; and degree to which content is meaningful and interesting. Use plain language that the patient identifies with and understands. Systematic health literacy is the ability to navigate through the healthcare environment. Examples of systematic health literacy in pharmacy include using the integrated voice response (IVR) on the pharmacy telephone line or refilling a prescription via mail order pharmacy.

**Open-ended Questions**

*Definition: designed to encourage a full meaningful answer using the subjects own knowledge or feelings*

Questions usually begin with a how, what, when, where, and why to illicit objective answers from the patient (The patient can not answer yes or no to these type of questions.)

**Example:**

*What did the doctor tell you this medication was for? What is your address? VS. Are you still at the same address? (asks for specific information) (yes or no answer)*

Communication skills are of the utmost importance in healthcare. The pharmacy technician in retail, long-term care, hospital or other settings will be expected to communicate effectively and efficiently. It is imperative that proper interpersonal skills are utilized during these interactions. Thus, the pharmacy technician needs to be assertive, utilize positive body language, actively listen to the customer and share mutual respect for all of those he or she comes in contact with during the day. Customer service is not just about making the customer happy but it encompasses health literacy, the use of open-ended questions and empathy to build the collaborative relationship between the patient and the healthcare team.
References


1) What is Health Literacy?
   A) The ability for a patient to obtain, process, and understand health information
   B) The ability for a pharmacist to adequately educate a patient on a new medication
   C) How comfortable the patient is with sharing personal information
   D) The process of developing patient package inserts and med guides for medications

2) How does using open-ended questions allow for better patient education?
   A) Open-ended questions do not allow for better patient education
   B) Open-ended questions allow the pharmacist to gauge a patient’s Health Literacy
   C) Open-ended questions allow the pharmacist to do most of the talking so the patient is not put on the spot
   D) Open-ended questions keep counseling short and sweet so the patient can remember everything

3) Patient X comes into the pharmacy. She approaches the pick-up window and states her name. You grab her bag of prescriptions and begin to ring them up. The patient yells at you and says you are overcharging for her medicine. You calmly look at the patient and tell her you understand that the medications seem expensive and that you’d be happy to verify the prices. This is an example of:
   A) Sympathy
   B) Empathy
   C) Customer Service
   D) Health Literacy

4) What is an open-ended question?
   A) Asks the patient to give you a yes or no answer
   B) Requires you to provide information to the patient
   C) Asks the patient to give you more information than just yes or no
   D) Asks the provider for information

5) In non-verbal communication, the pharmacy technician should be aware of body language, making eye contact, talking directly to the patient and:
   A) Mutual respect
   B) Positive attitude
   C) Interpersonal skills
   D) Active listening

6) What is a component of active listening?
   A) Listening to the patient without judgment
   B) Creating an argument while the patient is talking
   C) Interrupting the patient while they are talking
   D) Clarifying details while the patient is talking

7) Telephone etiquette includes which of the following:
   A) Answering the call with a simple “hello”
   B) Asking permission to put on hold
   C) Picking up the line and immediately placing the call on hold
   D) Hanging up abruptly without saying goodbye

8) What does good communication foster?
   A) Professionalism
   B) Teamwork
   C) Health literacy
   D) Interpersonal skills

9) What is the best personality type for pharmacy technicians?
   A) Passive
   B) Passive Aggressive
   C) Assertive
   D) Aggressive

10) When are text messages and emails appropriate forms of communication?
    A) When all of the phones in the pharmacy are being used
    B) It depends on the policy of the pharmacy
    C) When a doctor’s office has not responded to a fax
    D) When there is not enough time to make a phone call

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Pharmacy technicians must read this activity and successfully complete the exam (70% pass rate) and evaluation prior to December 31, 2015 using the following instructions:
  • Login to MY PORTFOLIO on www.GoToCEI.org
  • On the right of the title of this article, click on GO TO EXAM
  • Upon successful completion of the exam, you will see a page with explanations to the exam questions. After reading through this feedback, scroll to the bottom of the page and click GO TO EVALUATION
  • Complete the evaluation and click SUBMIT
  • You can obtain your CPE Statement of Credit at www.MyCPEMonitor.net
If you have any questions about this process, please contact Cindy Smith, csmith@GoToCEI.org, 515-270-8118.