Communication Adaptations for a Diverse International Patient Population

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Abstract

We live in an age of hyper connectivity, people from around the world are looking outside their own national borders to receive medical care. As more people are learning about the quality that the elite Indian hospitals provide at a competitive, and often more affordable, price compared to other institutions around the world, they are becoming increasingly interested in receiving their medical care in Indian hospitals. It is for this exact reason that it is very important to learn the importance of communicating effectively with people from a diverse background. Over the next decade, the number of international patients that Indian hospitals will provide care for is set to dramatically increase. In this new age of medicine in India, it is imperative that doctors are adequately equipped with the communication skills to appropriately connect with patients coming from very different cultural backgrounds. The interaction with an international patient can be tremendously deepened through effective communication that adheres to the cultural beliefs of the patient. In this article, we detail how to effectively communicate with people from different backgrounds. We explore how to speak with patients and connect on a deeper level and respect the cultural differences that exist. We will also discuss how to avoid offending your patients or miscommunicating your plans to them. Overall, improved awareness of cultural differences will ensure higher patient satisfaction as well as an improved doctor patient interaction.

Introduction

We live in an age of hyper connectivity, where people from around the world are looking outside their own national borders to receive medical care. As more people are learning about the quality that the elite Indian hospitals provide at a competitive, and often more affordable, price compared to other institutions around the world, they are becoming increasingly interested in receiving their medical care in Indian hospitals. The changing demographics of the patients, improved economy of India will to the private and public sector with opportunities for tremendous growth.1

In October 2015 the medical tourism sector in India was estimated to be worth US$ 3 billion. By 2020 this number is projected to be around $7-8 billions. The Medical Tourism Market report 2015 as found India to be one of the “lowest cost and highest quality of all medical tourism destinations as it offers a wide variety of medical procedures at one-tenth the cost of similar procedures in United States.”2

According to the CII- Grant Thornton report (2015) the patients from Bangladesh and Afghanistan comprise 34% of all foreign patients, while Russia and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) account for 30%. Other sources of patients include Africa, Middle – east particularly patients coming from Persian Gulf countries.3

Hospitals will need to develop new capabilities, business models to deal with the new opportunities of dealing with international patients. It is for this exact reason that it is very important to learn the importance of communicating effectively with people from a diverse background. Over the next decade, the number of international patients that Indian hospitals will provide care for is set to dramatically increase.3

In this new age of medicine in India, it is imperative that doctors are adequately equipped with the communication skills to appropriately connect with patients coming from very different cultural backgrounds. In this article, we will help physicians understand the essential concepts of intercultural communication. Although these concepts will be discussed through

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Table 1: Communication styles between high and low context cultures. Developed from reference 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High context culture</th>
<th>Low context culture</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indirect and implicit message</td>
<td>Direct simple and clear message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase use of non-verbal communication</td>
<td>Low use of non-verbal communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low reliance on written communication</td>
<td>High reliance on written communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use feelings and intuition to make decisions</td>
<td>Use data and evidence to make decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term relationships</td>
<td>Short-term relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships are more important than schedules</td>
<td>Schedules are more important than relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong distinction between in-group and out-group</td>
<td>Flexible and open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polychronic*</td>
<td>Monochronic**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Polychronic* - like to do multiple things at one time; Monochronic** - like to do one thing at one time

The Importance of Cultural Awareness in the Medical Field

Cultural beliefs are the lens through which an individual processes information, forms memories, and reacts to external stimuli. “Culture is an organized group of learned response, a system or ready-made solutions to problems people face that is learned through interactions with others in the society.” Cultural shapes an individual’s response to illness and treatment. Awareness to patient’s culture and sensitivity to basic premises is essential in providing high quality treatment to a patient.

As a population gets more diverse, and patient’s continuously move across states and country boundary lines, awareness and acknowledgement of cultural differences remains an essential skill for everyone associated with healthcare. Cultural sensitivity is defined as “The knowledge and the interpersonal skill that allows providers to understand, appreciate, and work with individuals from cultures other than their own. It involves an awareness an acceptance of cultural differences, self-awareness, knowledge of a patient’s culture and adaption of skills”5. A brief training of cultural sensitivity has been shown to improve the continuity of care and increase patient satisfaction.6

Medical practices that are known to understand and respond appropriately to cultural differences tend to be popular with patients and have been shown to have increased net earnings. Seibert and his colleagues7 have suggested a check list to identify readiness for Cultural sensitivity and awareness in a hospital could be helpful. This list includes:
1. Identifying patient’s preferred communication methods.
2. Identifying language barriers.
3. Identifying cultural differences.
4. Double checking with patients regarding their comprehension of illness.
5. Identifying any unique religious and spiritual beliefs.
6. Does the patient trust the health provider?
7. Assess any cultural or cultural-specific dietary considerations.
8. Identifying our own biases and prejudices.

Contextual Differences Among Cultures

It has been recognized that communication usually happens within a cultural context which includes a pattern of cultural and environmental cues and an implicit understanding that conveys a meaning between two members of the same culture. Hall8 has described cultures as high context or low context based on the difference of their communication styles (Table 1).

In high-context cultures, people rely less on verbal communication and more on the context of nonverbal actions and environmental settings to convey meaning. In high-context cultures, the rules of everyday lives are less explicit; instead, individuals grow to learn how to recognize situational cues in the form of gestures and tone of voice and know how to respond as expected. In high-context cultures, the executive offices could be shared and open to all colleagues and other managers would not require or expect detailed information. Information is shared with everyone. Subjective relationships are varied of objective data, and social as well as business relationships would overlap. Position and status are more valued much more than competence. Meetings could be called in a short notice and key people always accept. The primary role of communication is building a relationship and not exchanging information in most of these cases.8

In low-context cultures, people rely heavily on written agreements and interpret laws strictly, whereas high-context cultures view adherence to laws as being more flexible. The primary task of communication in low-context cultures is exchanging information. In low-context cultures, executive officers
Opportunities and Challenges of Communication in a Diverse World

Diversity includes all characteristic that define people as individuals. Intercultural communication is a process of sending and receiving messages between culturally diverse individuals that could lead to different interpretation of the verbal and nonverbal messages. There is a need to grasp cultural differences because efforts to recognize and bridge cultural differences will open up physicians practice opportunities while maximizing contributions of all employees in a diverse workforce.

There are several advantages of diverse workforce. They include (i) broad range of views and ideas, (ii) better understanding of diverse, fragmented markets and (iii) a broad pool of talent from which to recruit. Current physicians and hospital managers need to communicate with people from other cultures throughout your career. A hospital’s cultural diversity affects how its messages are conceived, composed, delivered, received and interpreted.

Culture influences everything about communication including: (i) language, (ii) nonverbal signals, (iii) meaning of words, (iv) time and space issues and (v) rules of human relationships.

It is important to keep in mind, while we encode our message according to our culture, others decode our message based on their background.

Cultural differences have led to development of cultural myopia like ethnocentrism and stereotyping. Ethnocentrism is the tendency to judge other groups according to standards, behaviors and customs of one’s own group. This has led to the feeling of superiority complex in one’s own group. On the other hand stereotyping is the tendency to assign generalized attributes to an individual on the basis of their belonging to a particular group. The most appropriate trait in current day environment is accepting cultural pluralism which is a practice of accepting multiple cultures as it is without one’s own personal biases. This would include avoiding assuming that all people will react similarly to the same message, avoid making premature judgments when people act differently and acknowledging the differences among various cultures.

Classifications of Cultural Differences

When it comes to knowing how people of various cultures would like to be treated it is essential to understand the eight variations in cultures namely (i) Contextual, (ii) Legal and ethical, (iii) Social (iv) Nonverbal, (v) Age, (vi) Gender, (vii) Religious and (viii) Ability.

i. Contextual Differences:

- Cultural context: physical cues, environmental stimuli and implicit understanding that conveys meaning between members of the same culture
- High context: rely less on verbal communication and more on nonverbal and environmental stimuli (i.e. Chinese speaker will not spell out all the details in a speech)
- Low context: value written agreements and interpret laws strictly (i.e. spelling out the rules through verbal communication)

ii. Legal and Ethical differences

- Actively seek mutual ground
- Send and receive messages without judgement
- Send messages that are honest
- Show respect for cultural differences

iii. Social differences
- Formal rules of etiquette are explicit and well-defined, but informal rules are learned through observation and imitation
- Respect and rank are reflected differently from culture to culture in the way people are addressed and in working environment
- The rules of polite behavior vary from country to country
- Attitudes toward times, such as adherence to meeting schedules vary throughout the world
- Cultures around the world exhibit degrees of openness toward outsiders and people whose identities don’t align with prevailing social norms

iv. Nonverbal differences
- The meaning of nonverbal signals vary from culture to culture so don’t make assumptions and rely on them
- What to study about the way people behave in a culture?
  - Greetings
  - Personal space
  - Touching
  - Facial expression
  - Eye contact
  - Posture
  - Formality

v. Age differences
- Culture view on youth and aging affect how people communicate with one another
- Different generation labels (based on year of birth)
  - Traditionalists (born before 1946)
  - Baby boomers (1946-1964)
  - Generation X (1965-1985)
  - Generation Y (born after 1980)

vi. Gender Differences
- Men emphasize content in message, women emphasize relationship management
- Different cultures have different norms when it comes to gender

vii. Religious Differences
- In many countries like US the law requires employers to accommodate employee’s religious beliefs to a reasonable degree
- Important in business to decide on policies
  - Either “check faith at the door”
  - Or allow religion-based support groups to be formed
- Want to avoid friction developing between employees

viii. Ability differences
- There are several assistive tech companies and national organizations that help companies to create a more workplace benefiting individuals with physicians or cognitive challenges. These companies provide devices and system that help with verbal and visual communication and allow individuals to have increased mobility in the workplace.

Adapting Our Approach to Other Cultures

To understand and adapt to other cultures we need to recognize the influences that our own culture has on our communication habits. This allows us to be aware of our habits. Unlike the golden rule of treat other people the way you want to be treated instead treat people the way they want to be treated.

Medical practitioners and other health team members need to exercise tolerance, be flexible in their approach, and respect all cultures. Practicing patience and maintain a sense of humor about one’s own fallibility.

Studying intercultural communication requires the modification of personal communication habits.

Physicians and health care systems taking care of a multicultural group of patients need to make an effort to learn about another person’s culture is a sign of respect. There are Websites like www.culturecrossing.net., that offer advice on traveling to and working in specific cultures. Guideline for the basic etiquette while meeting patients from different cultures and countries can be found in the section on Culture guide of this website.

How to Effectively Communicate with Patients from Another Culture

Culture is a shared system of symbols, beliefs, attitude, values, expectation, and behavior norms. While each of us belong to several cultures, each of which affects the way you communicate. We can learn about the differences in culture directly (through instruction) and indirectly (through observation).

Effective communication with a patient from another culture requires an effort on our part to understand that we might harbor previously unknown person biases (ethnocentrism and stereotyping). As mentioned previously cultural pluralism is the acceptance of multiple cultures on their own terms and should be practiced every time. Studying other cultures by reviewing the website mentioned.
in the previous section or taking a course on cultural difference can be help considerably.

Every large hospital leadership needs to realize that the need for members of their team to be fluent in other languages. While English is prevalent internationally as the patients travel globally we cannot assume that everyone understands it or speaks it the same way. As the business of medicine around the world grow, so too does the demand of multi-lingual communicators.

Hospital staff needs to respect the preference of patients regarding their communication style

Communication style varies widely from culture to culture by (i) level of directness, (ii) Degree of formality and (iii) preferences for written vs. spoken communication. We will describe some guidelines for written and spoken communication and the increasing role of having language interpreters and translators in taking care of patients from across other cultures. Watching and learning the patient communicate is the best way to adapt to their style and improve your skills

1. While sending written communication to patients from a different culture one should be aware of the following facts.
   i. Clarity and simplicity essential when writing to someone who doesn’t share your native language
   ii. Use simple, clear language
   iii. Be brief: write short sentences
   iv. Use transitional elements: allow them to follow your train of thought (use words like first, second, third, last)
   v. Address international correspondence carefully
      a. Addressing appropriate salutations used in other countries
   b. Cite member and dates properly: e.g. December 12, 2015 depicted differently in different countries
      i. In the US 12/5/2015
      ii. In Japan and China 2015-12-05
      iii. Other countries 05-12-2015
   vi. Humor does not “travel well” because it requires an intimate knowledge of a particular culture
      a. Avoid slang, idiomatic phrases, and business jargon
      b. Avoid humor or references to pop culture

2. Speaking and Listening Carefully
   i. Speaking clearly and getting frequent feedback are 2 keys to successful intercultural conversations
   ii. Listen more effectively in intercultural communities by letting others finish what they are saying and accepting what you hear without judgement.
   a. Steps to effective communication
      iii. Speak slow and clear
   iv. Don’t rephrase unless necessary, gives the person your communicating with more phrases to try and understand
   v. Look for and ask for feedback to make sure your message is coming across
   vi. Don’t talk down by over enunciating or oversimplifying sentences
   vii. At the end of the conversation, make sure you and the listener agree on what has been said and decided

3. Using interpreters, translators, and translating software
   i. For important business, use a professional interpreter (for oral communication) or a translator (for written communication)
   ii. Can help avoid embarrassing blunders in international business
   iii. Translation software helpful with individual words or short sentence, can give an overall gist of the message
   a. Still not as good as a professional interpreter
   iv. Help other adapt to your culture, respectfully
      a. Doing so will create a more productive workplace and will help you understand their cultures as well

Conclusion

Over the next decade, the number of international patients that physicians in India will provide care for is set to dramatically increase. In this new age of medicine in India, it is imperative that doctors are adequately equipped with the communication skills to appropriately connect with patients coming from very different cultural backgrounds. The interaction with an international patient can be tremendously deepened through effective communication that adheres to the cultural beliefs of the patient. Overall, improved awareness of cultural differences will ensure higher patient satisfaction as well as an improved doctor patient interaction.

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