

Straight Talk

Lynda Katz Wilner teaches doctors to communicate successfully with their patients.



Lynda Katz Wilner: Young foreign doctors "don't have idiomatic speech. They don't use the proper intonations. They'll say something and they're not understood."

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Lynda Katz Wilner has a saying. Communications, according to Ms. Wilner, "is a lot more than words."

Ms. Wilner should know. She is an Owings Mills speech-language pathologist who runs a communications and speech training business called "Successfully Speaking." While she has clients from all walks of life, her specialty is teaching physicians and other medical professionals to communicate with patients and colleagues.

Here's a good example of what she means: Ms. Wilner has asked international medical graduates (foreign doctors who have gone to medical school outside the United States or Canada) the following question: "If you heard that the patient in room 320 kicked the bucket last night, what happened?"

"I remember them saying, 'Did they have a party in the room?'" Ms. Wilner recalled.

With two major university-affiliated hospitals located in the city, physicians arrive in the area from,

literally, around the world. They speak English, but there's still so much to learn.

"Young doctors come here and they say, 'Well, I can speak about medicine, but I can't have conversations,'" Ms. Wilner commented.

"They don't have idiomatic speech. They don't use the proper intonations. They'll say something and they're not understood."

Communication works both ways. You may not understand a doctor with a strong accent; he or she may not understand American slang, such as "got sugar" as shorthand for diabetes.

Today's young physicians must learn to effectively communicate with patients and staff.

In fact, interpersonal and communications skills are considered so important that the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education, the council that evaluates and accredits more than 8,000 medical residency programs in the United States, has made it one of its six core competencies.

Hospitals also have a stake in improving communications between

their personnel and their patients. HCAHPS (pronounced H-Caps) is a standardized federal survey filled out by patients. The results are made public, with the goal of allowing consumers to better compare hospitals. In the new HCAHPS survey, fully 26 percent of the questions relate to understanding the doctor.

"When you bring people who speak different languages from different cultures together, it's hard and you have to be very focused on it," said Dr. Sallie Rixey, residency training program director in the Department of Family Practice at Franklin Square Hospital in Baltimore County. "I think cultural competence is huge."

Ms. Wilner has been helping foreign doctors modify their accents for 20 years. She conducts sessions for hospital and medical societies, and accepts individual clients. These days, she tries to go beyond correcting accents to giving foreign doctors an understanding of American culture.

"That's the biggest issue in effective communication between the provider, be it the doctor or nurse, and the patients and family. So regardless of whether there's an accent, are they communicating in a way that there's a positive rapport between the two?" asked Ms. Wilner, whose goal is to bridge that cultural divide.

She believes successful communication includes elements like eye contact, speaking more slowly and, even, just introducing yourself to the patient.

If a doctor has a long, unpronounceable name — to American ears, at least — Ms. Wilner suggests a couple of ways to deal with the situation. The doctor can tell the patient "just call me Dr. B," or say "it rhymes with ..."

Something that simple will put the patient at ease and help to establish a relationship. "The patient isn't left hanging, not knowing or understanding the name of the doctor," she said.

Dianne Maloney-Krichmar, director of medical education at Sinai Hospital, says the modern health care system is a mix of different generations, different cultures and different sexes.

"You have the whole spectrum — intergenerational, interpersonal, male-female. The medical profession has been very male-dominated, but now in many subspecialties there are more and more women," said Ms. Maloney-Krichmar.

She adds that while this makes for an exciting workplace, it also emphasizes the importance of clear communications.

According to Ms. Wilner, in today's health care environment, you have a one in four chance of seeing an international medical graduate. She urges patients to embrace the diversity, and not to shortchange themselves by attempting to select a doctor on the basis of a familiar last name.

But to Ms. Wilner, there is a larger issue. All medical professionals, whatever their native language, have a responsibility to effectively communicate with both patients and colleagues.

"That's something we all want to achieve," she said. □

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