



For you, your career, and your life

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Resident Assistance Program Newsletter

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## Patient Communication: It's Not Just What You Say, It's How You Say It

Very smart, competent doctors who do not communicate with empathy and respect are more likely to have noncompliant patients. They are also more likely to get themselves into legal trouble.

There are specific ways to gain a patient's trust, show respect and communicate caring. The very first encounter can set the tone.

### It's all about respect

"The worst thing a doctor can do is display arrogance and superiority," says Joseph Shrand, M.D., instructor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and medical director of Castle, an adolescent substance abuse program at High Point Treatment Centers in Brockton, Mass. "The best thing a doctor can do is demonstrate respect. Respect activates the brain's pre-frontal cortex, and builds the critical attachment between a physician and their patient. In this realm of trust, true healing begins."

A brain does not activate anger



"Think like a wise man but communicate in the language of the people."

- William Butler Yeats (1865 - 1939)

when it perceives it is being treated with respect, Shrand explains. "A doctor who is disrespectful is only going to anger and alienate their patient."

"Lawsuits are usually the result of anger," says Edna Ma, M.D., an anesthesiologist at St. John's Medical Center in Santa Monica, California. "Patients are less inclined to sue a doctor if they feel their doctor cares and if they genuinely like their doctor. It may be well worth a doctor's effort to take the time listen to a patient's concerns to avoid the costs of litigation."

Communicate with us, anytime. RAP is here to help when you find yourself dealing with a challenging issue during your residency. We are your confidential resource, and we understand the stress you deal with daily. We're also here to help you develop a personal skill set that will complement your medical knowledge. Our caring professionals are just a phone call away.

Contact RAP: 813-870-3344.

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### What not to say

No matter how stressed and pressed for time a doctor is, there are words and phrases that shouldn't be used in any encounter with patients or their families.

"I don't have time."

"I'm too busy."

"Stop complaining."

Phrases that are dismissive or condescending, or imply that a doctor's time is more important than

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### Perspectives: What is the best way to establish rapport with a patient?

Susan K. Bobrick, family member of a recently hospitalized patient: "Be kind and gentle—your words and attitude in the first visit will be the basis of your relationship with that patient, no matter how short or long the treatment."

Wendie A. Howland, RN MN CRRN CCM CNLCP, Principal, Howland Health Consulting, Inc.: "Speak to the patient's nurse and ask what's going on with him/her, the family, and the day. Ask what the patient knows already. Then go in, introduce yourself, sit down, turn off your pager, take as few notes as possible, and touch the person even if it's only a handshake. Use reflective language: 'I hear you saying that...' and 'So you had thus-and-such happen, did I get that right?' Never interrupt. Assume the role of a helper, not a person with all the answers, and mean it. Make that person feel as if s/he is the only concern you have all day today. Then ask if it's OK if you examine him/her."

Joseph Shrand, M.D.: "Be honest. I tell my patients I will never lie to them. I may say things they don't want to hear, but I am going to say them anyway. I expect the same honesty from them. I tell them I'll do the best I can to help. Other people will tell me what they see. I bring my experience. But they are the only one who can tell me what it is like to be them. I rely on them to be as accurate a reporter as they can be."

