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Communicating With a Doctor Across Cultures

Cultural differences between doctor and patient can affect health care. As a caregiver, you may need to help bridge communication gaps.

PRINT

By Eve Glicksman, Staff Writer



You take care of your Asian mother with diabetes. She only knows a little English so she has trouble when visiting the doctor. Worse, she won't take her medicine and would rather take care of her symptoms with herbs. What's a caregiver to do?

A person's cultural background can affect his or her health care in major ways. Aside from language differences, traditional beliefs may fly in the face of standard medical practice. But with a little forethought, caregivers can tackle these issues and cushion any bumps in the road.

A doctor you trust

The person you're caring for may have strong feelings about the age, gender, language, and cultural or ethnic background of his or her health care provider. Your loved one may be a lot more comfortable talking about private health matters with a doctor of the same race, or who speaks the same language. If this is the case, ask others in your community if they can suggest such a doctor. Some studies suggest when people are well-matched with their doctors, medical outcomes may improve.

"Can you repeat that?"

For some, language differences may be an issue during the office visit.

- Call ahead to see if the doctor or a staff member speaks the language of the person being examined.
- If not, ask if an interpreter can be provided or look for one yourself.
- Let the doctor know if English is a second language. Ask the doctor to speak slowly as needed.
- Suggest that the doctor use pictures to help explain things.
- Request printed health information or a CD in your loved one's own language if available.

Before the doctor visit

Talk with the person you're caring for about what to expect at the office visit. One of you should:

- Bring all medications to show the doctor. This includes over-the-counter items such as vitamins, herbs, and supplements.
- Bring a list of other doctors involved in the case. Make copies of medical records or test results.
- Write down questions for the doctor.
- Practice what you want to say to the doctor.

Being part of the medical team

In some cultures, doctors are seen as authority figures. That may mean that it is not polite to question a doctor. But, it's important to know that if you don't ask questions, a doctor may think you already have the knowledge or you don't want to know more. Not being well informed can lead to lower quality health care.

During the doctor visit, help the person you're caring for to:

- Let the doctor know if he or she is feeling rushed, afraid, or uncomfortable.
- Ask the doctor to explain anything that isn't clear.
- Inquire about whether there are different treatment options.
- Talk about any concerns with medicine, tests, or treatment.
- Point out any faith or lifestyle practices, such as diet, that need to be considered in the treatment plan.

The need to know

People's privacy should always be respected by caregivers and medical staff. But, as a caregiver, you may need to encourage the person you're caring for to share some personal things with the doctor. Some of these things might include:

- Not having money or insurance to pay for medicine or care.
- Not being able to leave work for a medical test or not having a ride to an appointment.
- The name you'd like the doctor or nurse to call you.
- Problems with smoking, drinking, mental health, or sexual relations.
- Possibly embarrassing health issues like bowel or bladder problems, or depression.
- Any spiritual beliefs about sickness, healing, or death that need to be respected.

Working together

As the caregiver, you are in a good place to alert the medical team of any ethnic or cultural issues that might have an impact on treatment. You can also be an advocate. This might mean reminding health care providers to speak slowly, for instance, or that certain diet restrictions must be respected.

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