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May 2004

Ethical Issues: Communication

Nothing is more important to the welfare of patients, providers, and health care systems than effective patient centered communication. This occurs by having the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and organizational infrastructure to foster the comprehension and application of often-vast amounts of information. The first step in fostering patient centered communication is to encourage providers to understand their own health-related values and beliefs, recognizing that everyone may not share in those beliefs. Conflict may occur between providers and patients when difficult decisions are required at times of severe illness or at the end of life when there is miscommunication. Sensitivity to ethnic, cultural, religious, and personal differences is the first step in avoiding conflict, but providers must also have the right tools and training to engage patients with respect and elicit patients' understanding of health and illness and their expectations about treatment. Providers should also be sensitive to the fact that health information can often be complex and difficult to understand, especially for patients who are ill, and their families.

Numerous standards and guidelines have been published outlining strategies for developing effective communication competencies.^{i ii iii} The Institute of Medicine (IOM) suggests that health communication programs should explicitly consider ethical guidelines and that theories of communication and health behavior should be considered during development and implementation. IOM goes further to suggest that practitioners should employ evidence-based, multi-component programs that integrate good communication with access to services where feasible, and especially where such a need for diverse populations has been demonstrated. Providing access to translators in emergency departments, clinics, and urgent care centers is an example.

The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) found that patients indicate a need to be recognized and treated as individual by hospital staff. They want to be continuously informed about their illness and condition. An atmosphere respectful of the individual patient focuses on quality of life, involves the patient in medical decisions, provides the patient with dignity, and respects a patient's autonomy. Other important findings underscore the importance of full disclosure to patients about their medical condition, emotional support to alleviate fear and anxiety, involvement of family and friends when important discussions need to be made, giving clear and understandable instructions when being discharged from the hospital, and enabling access to their physician. Patients place more trust in their healthcare providers if they feel they can access them whenever there is a need—a difficult expectation for most of us.

Patients want, and have the right, to know. We are increasingly challenged, as individuals and as a health care organization, to meet this expectation. To meet these needs everyone, physicians, nurses, therapists, chaplains, social workers, administrators,

and everyone else involved in the care of the patient (which means everyone in our system), must strive to meet the expectations given us. To be effective as health care professionals we must strive to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will enable us to communicate well with each other and with our patients and their families.

ⁱ IOM. *Speaking of Health: Assessing Health Communication Strategies for Diverse Populations*. July 2002

ⁱⁱ AHRQ, Hospital-CHAPS. *Eight Dimensions of Patient-Centered Care*. January, 2003

ⁱⁱⁱ JACHO. *Standards Related to Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Service Provisions*. 4/05/04