

Winning Strategies for Communicating with the Renal Patient

by Lori Hartwell

Improving relationships between renal care workers and patients is an important goal to strive for, as it amounts to a "win/win" for everybody. Doctors, nurses, dietitians, social workers and technicians can experience less hassles in a day, and can go home feeling good about what they're doing, knowing they might have made someone's day. Patients, for their part, rely so heavily on the feedback of the medical professionals in their world, that their journey to health can be radically impacted by the positive or negative reception they receive on even the most mundane of medical appointments.

Living with kidney disease since the age of 2, I sigh to consider the thousands of medical visits under my belt. These experiences, along with the feedback I've received from both the medical community and countless patients I've come to know throughout my career in the renal care industry, have helped me in formulating a few ideas on how healthcare workers can "communicate" better with the patients they serve.

End-stage renal disease is unlike any other chronic illness. Because of the many treatment options available, we can still live with the support of dialysis or a transplant. The reality is we generally spend more time with our renal care professionals than we do with our own families. The renal care professional's vision of our future and the ability to communicate a positive message effectively is crucial to our well-being.

Anatomy of Communication

In the fine art of "bedside manner," your physical being can literally serve as a bridge to better relating. First there are your *ears*. When someone is willing to stop for a minute and really listen, intently absorbing what you are telling them, a sense of caring and trust is instantly communicated. There is nothing more comforting than feeling heard.

Equally, the *eyes* certainly have it, when it comes to answering the unspoken question, "Do you *really* care?" When you take a few moments to make eye contact with a patient while you're listening, that patient knows beyond a shadow of a doubt, "I'm being heard."

Also, your *voice* can do wonders to increase the flow of understanding with a patient. By verbally echoing back the sentiments the patient has shared, "So you're feeling some pain in your access?" The patient develops a sense of confidence that says, "Wow! This busy person cares enough to slow down, make eye contact with me and really take what I'm saying seriously. I think this person has what it takes to help me get better."

Along with your ears, eyes and voice, your *hands* can send a message of touching comfort. Just a hand on the patient's shoulder or even holding the patient's hand, if appropriate, can sooth a person's fears to a degree that cannot be matched by a pill or potion.

Building Trust

Building a better relationship with a patient and inspiring greater cooperation and

compliance has everything to do with trust. On top of using the trust-building "physical" suggestions we've talked about, confidence needs to be established on several professional levels. The patient wants to know, among other things, "Does this person know what he or she is doing?" and "Will he or she do their best to make this situation or procedure easier on me?"

By acknowledging a patient's fears and concerns and letting that person know that their worries or discomforts are understandable, given the situation, the patient develops trust in the medical professional's breadth of experience and knowledge. They also feel a sense that "Whew! I'm normal! And I'm going to get through this!"

Attention to a patient's immediate comfort can also go a long way toward increasing their trust in you, the medical professional. Whether it's an extra blanket or being given a say in the type of access tape used, even the smallest of gestures can make the assuring point that, "When you're in *my* care, you're going to be as comfortable as possible." Sending this message will often significantly reduce a patient's anxiety, earn you a more compliant and motivated patient and win you a fan for life!

Acknowledging the Challenges

While it's not easy working in the renal care field, it is also not easy being a patient. In some cases, the medical dilemma at hand represents the scariest, most earth-shattering experience of the patient's life. The person's physical and financial worlds may have been shaken to the core by their medical condition. Chances are, the patient is feeling extremely vulnerable and out of control.

Certainly, given the impact of so many situations, general kindness, courtesy and an empathetic attitude will usually pave the way for a less confrontational or negative exchange between medical personnel and the patient.

However, sometimes even the most gracious of renal care workers can take the brunt of emotions from a depressed, cranky and demanding patient. I believe that in most cases the anger is a mask for fear, fear of an unknown future and a host of worries involving every single facet of life. In these unique cases, I suggest approaching the patient on a different level by finding out about their personal interests, be they sports, movies or hobbies.

If you can take a few minutes to redirect the conversation away from the person's illness, you can often build a bridge of commonality where trust and a sense of camaraderie can begin to flourish. Or, if the patient is showing signs of depression they may need professional help.

Part of acknowledging a patient's challenges can run you into your own dilemma. How can you, as a renal care professional, be sympathetic to the challenges faced by the patient, and still be firm on difficult issues such as compliance involving dietary restrictions or medications?

My suggestion is to avoid scolding the person, as this serves to accomplish little apart from raising their defenses. Instead, acknowledge the difficulty of taking 20 pills a day or eliminating salty foods from one's diet. Then reiterate why it's important to stay on the particular diet or to take the regimen of prescribed medications.

End by asking if there is anything you can do to help make things easier for them. This approach won't guarantee success, but it will allow the patient to save enough face to stay in a game in which both you and they desperately need *their* cooperation.

The Final Round

The ability to communicate in a caring, empathetic and tactful manner is an extremely important skill that all renal care professionals must demonstrate. Taking the extra time will save time in the long run. When the patient feels like you're in their corner, everybody wins. Renal disease is a challenging opponent, but a supportive coach can help you beat the odds