



Cultural Insights

A bi-yearly publication of RMHP designed to increase understanding of cultural differences and improve patient outcomes.

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Communication Barriers within the Doctor/Patient Relationship

Communication Breakdown

Cultural communication barriers within our society can prove to be challenging. Individuals have varying belief systems, perceptions and expectations which make the delivery of health care difficult if Medical professionals do not recognize and understand their patients' cultural background. Take for example the following story where the patient's perception of her doctor's treatment caused her never to return to his office.

A middle aged African American woman who has been struggling to gain control of her diabetes is finally responding well to treatment. Her physician has indicated that since her treatment is going so well and things are under control, she does not need to come back for six months – unless she starts feeling bad again.

The woman is concerned and asked what her provider meant by “under control” as she was expecting a cure and to not have to continue treatment. The doctor explained diabetes is a chronic condition and there is no cure. The patient never returns to the doctor's office (Gropper, 1996).

Why would the patient not return to her doctor's office for follow up check-ups? It is essential for providers to connect with their patients and understand their cultural background. Otherwise “when communication is impaired, often the physical healing process may be impaired” (Giger, Davidhizar, 1999).



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As with the case noted above, the communication breakdown between the patient and doctor resulted in the patient not returning. The doctor was pleased the patient was responding well to treatment, however, the patient interpreted the doctor's message differently. Her understanding was that he was unable to help her and therefore, she needed to seek medical care elsewhere. The conversation was perceived completely different between the doctor and patient (Giger, Davidhizar, 1999).



Did you know?

- Within 50 years, nearly half of the nation's population will be from cultures other than White, non-Hispanic, increasing needs to provide medical services to patients of diverse cultures or languages.
- African American children are hospitalized 3.6 times as often as White children for asthma, and are more likely to die of asthma.
- Cultural and language differences may engender misunderstanding, lack of compliance, or other factors that negatively influence clinical situations.

Office of Minority Health website retrieved October 20, 2009

Additional training on the importance of Cultural Competency is offered through the Office of Minority Health by going to the following website: <https://cccm.thinkculturalhealth.org>

As an RMHP participating physician or provider, it is your responsibility to provide interpretive services for RMHP Members enrolled in federally funded programs, at no cost to the Member. Additionally, the interpretive services are not billable to RMHP. If your office is unable to accommodate interpretive requests, RMHP provides access to a language line for providers seeing RMHP Members. Translators representing multiple languages are available and can be arranged by calling RMHP Customer Service at 970-243-7050 or 800-346-4643.

Please note: Information given about a particular culture is intended to provide only a general idea of belief systems. It is important not to stereotype or categorize a patient based on his or her culture or country of origin. Beliefs depend upon many factors, including the degree of acculturation and assimilation. Use the information as a guide, but individualize for each patient.

