

Jill Sederstrom

# Enhance Your Patient Counseling Skills

Effective patient counseling improves patient adherence. Here's some things you can do to enhance your skills.



About 3.8 billion prescriptions are written each year; but an estimated one in five are never filled, according to a 2017 *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* from the CDC. In addition, approximately 50% of prescriptions are taken incorrectly based on timing, dosage, or frequency of duration recommendations.

Each year, nonadherence costs are estimated by the CDC to be between \$100 and \$300 billion in the United States.

Research shows that pharmacist counseling can improve patient adherence, but despite these studies, overall adherence rates have continued to remain low over several decades.

"We haven't changed the way we talk to patients," says Bruce Berger, PhD, president of Berger Consulting, a company that provides education and training on motivational interviewing techniques. "We're stuck in an old paternalistic model of care, where we tell people what to do and assume if we educate them that's enough."

To enhance patient counseling skills, experts believe pharmacists need to move beyond reciting medical knowledge to a more collaborative and conversational approach—even when the time for each patient interaction is short.

### Obstacles to Effective Patient Counseling

Jen Alexander, PharmD, pharmacy manager at NuCara Pharmacy in Pleas-

### COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES

- ▶ Improve interpersonal relationships with patients
- ▶ Use the teach back method to ascertain what patients have learned

ant Hill, IO, says that time is the biggest obstacle to effective counseling. In her role at a regional chain she's given sufficient time to interact with each patient, but says she's had jobs in the past where that wasn't the case.

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"The other thing is patients who aren't receptive, and that's discouraging," she says, adding that even in these cases she tries to highlight the most important information for a patient for a given medication. In a hospital setting, patients may not be receptive to counseling efforts because they may be overwhelmed by a new diagnosis or simply aren't in a frame of mind where they can process the information, says Jacqueline L. Olin, PharmD, BCPS, FASHP, professor of pharmacy at Wingate University School of Pharmacy, Charlotte, NC.

Other potential obstacles include a patient's health literacy, cultural or lan-

guage barriers, a perceived lack of privacy in a community pharmacy setting, or an incomplete picture of a patient's health state or habits.

Here are some specific strategies pharmacists can use to perfect their counseling skills.

### 1. Establish Stronger Relationships

Brittany L. Melton, PhD, PharmD, assistant professor of pharmacy practice at the University of Kansas School of Pharmacy, and her colleague Zoe Lai, recently assessed pharmacy services

and opportunities to improve patient satisfaction. They looked at 50 different pharmacy and pharmacy service studies done between 2006 and 2016.

"Patient satisfaction was higher [and] they were more loyal to the pharmacy when they had a good relationship with the pharmacist," says Melton. "It's those interpersonal skills, being able to relate with the patient and provide them information on their level that seemed to have a pretty significant impact."

Alexander says pharmacists in her state, Iowa, are required to provide counseling for each new prescription. This helps pharmacists establish that interpersonal relationship with pharmacy

customers. It's an approach that pharmacists in other states, where this is not a requirement, might want to consider.

"It's easy to hide behind the counter and check the prescription and make sure it's all right, but they need to see your face, they need to know who you are, and need to know you are doing what is best for them even if they are in a hurry," Alexander says.

## 2. Adopt New Communication Strategies

While most pharmacists don't have a lot of time to establish this relationship, Berger believes they can use the time they do have more wisely by restructuring communication with patients.

"We've got to mine down to what's causing this patient who has diabetes to not take their medication when their blood sugar is substantially elevated," he says. "Is it because of side effects? Is it because they feel OK and don't realize how serious this is? It is because of the cost of the medication?"

Berger offers an e-learning course through Purdue University and the NCPA bookstore on improving communication with patients using motivational interviewing. Berger says pharmacists should consider "sense making" when interacting with patients; the idea that patients' behaviors and decisions about their care are primarily driven by how they make sense of their illness, their medications, or their perceptions of their healthcare professionals.

When people are ambivalent or resistant to change, he says, it is frequently caused by incomplete or incorrect knowledge. For example, a patient who has high blood pressure, may not understand why the medication is needed because he or she feels fine.

"A sense leads to a conclusion, which leads to a decision about a behavior. The sense is I feel fine, the conclusion is I am fine," Berger says, adding that patients may then choose not to take

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the medication.

To combat incorrect knowledge, Berger recommends asking open-ended questions in a nonthreatening manner that reflect back the patient's feelings, attitudes, or knowledge about a given medication. This positions the pharmacist to intervene and tailor his or her response to specifically address patient concerns in a conversational manner and invites the patient to reconsider their decision.

"We've got this idea in healthcare that we are driving the bus and the patient is the passenger. The reality is the patient is driving the bus and we're trying to influence the routes," Berger says.

Another strategy is to use what Norm Tomaka, BS Pharm, MS, FAPhA, a clinical consultant pharmacist, calls teach back; a strategy that asks patients to reflect back what they've learned. For example, a pharmacist may teach a patient how to properly use an inhaler and then have the patient demonstrate using it.

"The teach back method will unravel all these mysteries about a patient's health literacy without having to directly say 'Do you understand what I am saying?'" he says.

At her pharmacy, Alexander uses a summary wrap-up at the end of her counseling sessions that reiterates the most important aspects that the patient needs to remember. She also tries to sit down with a patient or have regular eye contact to make sure the patient is engaged in the conversation.

The goal with all three approaches is the same: to ensure patients walk away with the information they need.

"If a patient comprehends their therapy and they buy into their therapy,

they are much more likely to comply," Tomaka says.

## 3. Take a Team Approach

The entire pharmacy team can play a role in promoting informational exchanges.

"We have clerks and we have pharmacy technicians and they all know how important it is that patient cannot leave until the pharmacist talks with them," Alexander says.

Pharmacists can also hone their own communication skills by watching the language other pharmacists use during their patient counseling sessions and incorporating effective phrasing into their own scripts.

## 4. Provide an Outlet for Future Communication

Pharmacists can help foster a patient's retention by providing resources, such as written instructions, calendars for complex dosing regimens, or links to videos that show a critical skill.

These supplemental tools can assist patients who may have additional questions once they leave the pharmacy or hospital, but these tools don't take the place of a pharmacist.

An essential part of any patient counseling exchange should be letting the patient know how to get in touch with the pharmacist again if they have any questions or concerns.

"If there is a relationship between a pharmacist and a patient, a patient will feel comfortable in contacting that pharmacist for more information, but you have to build that trust," Tomaka says. **DT**

*Jill Sederstrom is a contributing editor.*