

Poor Doctor-Patient Communication Leads to Misdiagnoses

Poor doctor-patient communications leads to misdiagnoses, the ordering of unnecessary tests and the failure of patients to follow treatment plans, research says.

Studies show good communication resulted in a higher degree of adherence to prescribed treatments and improved emotional and physical health in people with a variety of illnesses, such as lower blood sugar levels in diabetic patients, lower blood pressure in hypertensive patients, and a reduction in pain in cancer patients.

However, a breakdown of communication is a common theme of malpractice suits. **Dr. Wendy Levinson**, vice chairwoman of the University of Toronto's department of medicine, has conducted many studies on doctor-patient communication.

Study findings

- Only 15% of patients fully understand what their doctors tell them.
- Some 50% leave their doctor's offices uncertain of what they are supposed to do to care for themselves.
- Doctors with a more dominant tone of voice were more likely to be sued by patients than those whose voices contained more warmth.
- The doctor patient relationship often has more to do with lawsuits than actual physical harm.
- Women are better at building relationships with their doctors than most men:
 - The typical male patient asks zero questions during a 15 –minute doctor's visit.
 - The typical female asks 6 questions, according to a study by **Dr. Sherrie Kaplan**, an associate dean in the college of medicine at the University of California, Irvine.
- Patients were interrupted by their doctor 18 seconds into explaining their problems in 1984.
- When a follow-up study was done in 1999, doctors had learned to give their patients 23 seconds before interrupting.