

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION

Communication is an integral part of our everyday life. Good communication determines the quality of life most of us enjoy while poor communication contributes to much of the misery of modern living. No doubt most of us pharmacists strive to acquire good communication skills that enable us to achieve our responsibility: ensuring safe and effective use of medicines. This not only includes helping patients get the best from their medicines but advising patients on minor ailments, working with staff, working with other health care professionals and working with health organisations. Hence the challenge resides in first identifying the barriers to communication, that is why things go wrong and then finding strategies to overcome these barriers and getting things right.

Why things go wrong

Human communication is a complex process originating from the very fact that men and women are different. Not only do men and women communicate differently but they think, feel, perceive, react, respond, love, need, and appreciate differently. They almost seem to be from different planets, thus speaking different languages. Nevertheless, the basic skills that make up human communication remain unchanged for the two sexes and they may be summarised as: Questioning, Explaining, Listening and Reflecting. Most of us have an understanding of these basic skills but we so often fail to put them into practice.

Barriers to communication are either physical or emotional in nature. Physical barriers such as speech difficulties, deafness, noisy environment, poor sight and poor cognitive skills or mental ability are easily identified and we tend to make allowances in such situations. On the other hand, emotional barriers seem to be less obvious such that they lead to misunderstanding and misconception of various issues. Perceptions, prejudice, fear, aggression and threat are but a few of our emotional barriers. Subconsciously, we may be less helpful, sympathetic and tolerant to someone who is smelly and rude. But to overcome our prejudice is to be truly professional.

Getting things right

The basic communication skills: questioning, explaining, listening and reflecting if used appropriately would help to avoid many of the misunderstandings and conflicts. Questioning is the first step of any conversation and questions asked are of two main types: open questions and closed questions. However, when dealing with patients, closed questions make up the majority of questions asked by us, pharmacists, because they are easier to formulate and faster for patients to answer.

Open questions however have the advantage of allowing us to find out more about the patient and his condition but they take longer to be asked and answers are often lengthy and time consuming. Ideally, a mixture of closed and open questions should be asked to enable us to get, not only a useful sketch but depth and colour of the picture the patient might be trying to tell us so that the correct decisions are made.

Explaining and giving advice to patients constitute an important part of our job and the degree of explanation given is based on the background, age and intellectual ability of our patient. The most important issue resides in being able to give brief, clear and precise explanation. Feedback from the patient then ensures that the message is understood. There is however no point in asking questions if the answer is not listened to. Listening is one of the most important communication skills that many of us have difficulty to master because listening is much more than hearing what the other person is saying. Active listening demonstrates genuine respect and concern for the person. Bearing in mind that listening involves both verbal and non-verbal aspects, we should remember to nod our head, smile, have direct eye contact, mirror facial expression as often as possible since whenever verbal and non-verbal messages do not coincide, the non-verbal message wins. The fourth basic skill is reflecting. Reflecting involves paraphrasing and demonstrating that not only are we listening to the patient but we are understanding what they are feeling. This means translating the other person's ideas into our own words. Hence showing empathy towards patients is an art that should be cultivated.

Having identified the barriers that can get in the way of good communication and the strategies that may be used to overcome these potential problems, we should aim at maximising our ability as professionals to improve the quality of our communication in our daily life. The human mind is so complex and yet sometimes unable to understand simple facts. So care should be taken so that innocent sentences are not received as criticism to the person we are communicating with. The familiar maxim says it all "It's not what you say, but the way you say it!" which determines how positive the communication is.

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LOAN FROM DEVELOPMENT BANK OF MAURITIUS LTD

Loans are available from the DBM for opening new pharmacies or for renovation of your pharmacies. The DBM gives a loan of about 70% of the cost of the project and 30% is your contribution. The interest rate is 13% and the period of the loan is between 5-7 years. A lot of document would be required from the applicant namely

- (1) Birth certificate (new copy)
- (2) Identity card.
- (3) Location plan of (a) residence (b) business
- (4) CEB or CWA receipts.
- (5) Development permit.
- (6) Building permit.
- (7) Plan of building + site plan of land.
- (8) Trade licence.
- (9) Quotations for furniture, fitting equipments (70% of the amount is drawn directly on the supplier's name).
- (10) Valuation report

Further information is available at the DBM, main office.

Members of PAM are willing to assist members if they have any problem at DBM level.