

## **Teamwork: Doctor-Patient Communication**

By Lindsay Woolman, Featured in *South Coast Health Magazine*, 2008

*SCMC physician Cheryl Patterson, M.D., and others share their thoughts on how patients can get the most out of the relationships with their doctors.*

The relationship between a doctor and his or her patient is important. Communication is a crucial aspect of this relationship and it is a two-way street. Some patients are too anxious to ask certain questions, while others may feel that it's not important to share all the information. Doctors are not mind readers and want to know what's going on with their patients, so they may provide the best healthcare possible. By working together as a team, both doctor and patient will reap the rewards.

### **Strategies for Communication**

"I believe that communication is the key to all successful relationships, especially those that depend on your own health and longevity," says Dr. Cheryl Patterson, an Internal Medicine physician who has been practicing for six years at South Coast Medical Center. Her advice is for patients to be upfront about discussing problems and to expect honest answers from their doctors.

Patients should spend some time preparing for their visit and treat it like an important meeting. Since most routine office visits are about 10-15 minutes on average due to the doctor's set schedule, bring up the most critical concerns first. "The time spent with the doctor is really about the quality, not the quantity," says Dr. Patterson. To prevent feeling rushed, decide what needs to be addressed in advance. If there are multiple issues, schedule separate appointments for each one. "Physicians would rather have you come in every week rather than try to squeeze it all into one visit," she adds.

Dr. Patterson also emphasizes the importance of being proactive and educating patients. Doctors often use technical language, so it is important to ask questions. "Information is the key to feeling confident as to where you're going for your treatment plan and what's going to happen," she says. Even asking the most basic questions can help ease fears, such as if vital signs are normal, if any tests are needed, and when to make the next appointment. For patients who want to do online research, Dr. Patterson recommends the medical board level website, [uptodate.com](http://uptodate.com), which includes a section for patients to type in

medical conditions and get a list of articles. Of course, visiting the doctor is the best way to get an accurate diagnosis.

### **Mistakes to Avoid**

“Leaving confused is definitely a mistake,” says Dr. Patterson, who makes a point to write down what the patient needs to do next and gives that note to the patient.

Since a lot of information transpires in a short amount of time, having a written copy keeps things less confusing. Also, the doctor wants the patient to have a clear understanding of what has transpired at the visit. If an action needs to be taken, like changing a medication or getting a lab test done, both doctor and patient need to be on the same page.

Another mistake is not bringing in a list of medications and dosages, including over-the-counter medications and supplements. “Keep the list in your wallet and get it laminated,” says Dr. Patterson. “This is mandatory for emergency rooms and hospital visits.”

Sharon Vanderlan, a patient who lives in San Juan Capistrano, further emphasizes the importance of discussing medications with every doctor and the pharmacist. A few years ago while being treated by two separate doctors she got sick after taking medications that were not supposed to be prescribed together. “Doing the wrong thing can hit you quickly,” she says. “It’s important to communicate which medications you are taking with everyone who is treating you.”

Another patient, Jeffrey Ross, a resident of Laguna Beach, says that another mistake is not managing personal healthcare. He recently celebrated his 5-year survival anniversary from pancreatic cancer thanks to his annual exam and quick action by Dr. Patterson. “Because of her action and reaction to blood work that was not typical of me, I’m alive today,” he says. He recommends getting copies of all lab reports and putting them in a folder. Most people will switch doctors at some point or will need to see a specialist, so be prepared. Even though lab reports will not make a lot sense to most people, they have important information for the doctor.

In addition, many people are afraid to discuss explicitly what kind of problems they’re having with their doctor. “I had a best friend who used to brag he hadn’t had a physical in 20 years,” says Jeffrey. “Even though he started having night sweats and coughs he still ignored the problem. He passed away 3 years ago from lung cancer.” Unfortunately, ignoring symptoms usually makes the problem worse,

so people should listen to their bodies and get in to see their doctor as a precaution.

Patients who learn to communicate effectively with their doctors tend to have higher satisfaction and faster response rates, so it's worth the effort. Both of Dr. Patterson's patients are grateful to her and to all the doctors at South Coast Medical Center for their detailed care and guidance. Together, with each person playing their part, the doctor and patient relationship will be a success.

[Sidebar]

### **Do's and Don'ts for Patients**

Do:

- Prioritize questions ahead of time
- Bring up the most important concerns first
- Carry a list of medications and dosages, including supplements
- Be honest and open
- Make separate appointments if needed
- Be mindful about the doctor's limited time
- Ask the doctor to write down any instructions
- Get copies of lab work and keep in a folder
- Take an active role and become an expert
- Follow the doctor's advice

Don't:

- Ignore symptoms
- Withhold information due to being scared or embarrassed
- Discuss unrelated concerns first thing in the visit
- Assume the doctor knows what you're thinking
- Leave the appointment without a clear plan of action
- Avoid annual exams by assuming you are healthy