

In the same way as medication has side effects, so also a visit to (or by) the doctor may have psychological "side effects", such as relief, worry, suspicion, guilt feelings or blame. Sometimes psychological factors are themselves the central issues behind the symptoms treated by the doctor, as in the case of psychosomatic illness and stress induced illness.

The doctor's role is not merely to diagnose and prescribe treatment, but also to advise patient on lifestyle, attitudes and preventive measures. How well a doctor's propositions are attended to and implemented by the patients and their caregivers depends heavily on how doctors put their message across and the nature of the doctor-patient relationship. What follows is a series of psychological skills that can enable doctors to notice these psychological "side" or central "effects", and to use these to arrive at an optimal working relationship with the patient. In medical jargon, this paper is a sure-fire prescription for an effective bedside manner.

I will be referring to four basic skills, which are:

1. **Listening and attending**
2. **Using the understanding response**
3. **Validation**
4. **Legitimation**

To illustrate my presentation of each I will be using two hypothetical case studies:

(a) an 18 year old young lady we can call Anna who consults her family doctor regarding an itch she has been feeling in her vagina, and

(b) a 38 year old man to be called George who has been diagnosed with a stomach ulcer.

Listening and attending

Telling the doctor what you have and what you are feeling is very important for the patient. It feels as if one is removing a heavy burden that could not be handled. By letting the patient talk and by paying close attention, the doctor can become aware of psychological factors, e.g.. the fact that Anna feels guilty about sexual encounters she should not have had and fears that perhaps she is being punished for her immorality, or in the case of George that he is in over his head with work commitments and his wife is not taking his over-involvement at work very well.

Listening and attending sounds deceptively simple as a technique. Important components of this skill are: facing the patient, maintaining eye-contact, an open posture, the assuming of encouraging non-verbal behaviour (e.g.. leaning forward, nodding) and the ability to focus and concretize patient expression. For example:

To Anna who tends to ramble in her nervousness: "You were telling me about your last date with your boyfriend before you began to talk about discos, let's go back to that shall we?"

To George: "You said that you have a lot of worries, perhaps you can tell me what exactly is worrying you".

The effect that listening and attending has on the patient is a sense that the doctor is thorough

and must really have a grip on the problem now that he or she knows so much. This boosts the patient's confidence in the doctor significantly. Also by the cathartic effect of unburdening oneself, the patient is relieved and in a better state to address the medical problem.

Using the Understanding response

This is a skill used extensively in counselling and psychotherapy. It can be loosely defined as showing the other person what you have understood. It can range from merely repeating what the person has said, to it's more advanced forms where the therapist senses the unsaid and shows the client that he or she has understood even that. A basic understanding response to Anna may be: "So if I understood what you said, you are worried about what caused this itching". To George the doctor may say: "From what you are telling me I can see that you are being bombarded by demands by everyone, your boss, your wife, your children..."

When the doctor uses such understanding responses, the patient is assured that the doctor understands. Once again this increases confidence and trust in the doctor and leads to the formation of a "working alliance" ensuring that the patient will listen to the doctor's recommendations and put them into practice. In addition the understanding response has the effect of leading the patient to risk more and reveal more. Anna may draw up enough courage to reveal that she actually had sex with her boyfriend and now feels terrible about it. George

may confide in the doctor by adding that the real source of his worries is the fact that he found out his company is embroiled in criminal activity and the police are closing in. These are facts that the doctor needs to know in order to give the right advice and prescribed treatment.

Legitimation

Many times persons are very self critical, and although their exterior may show that they are confident and sure of themselves, deep down they are very prone to condemning themselves, to dwelling on their mistakes and ignoring the mitigating circumstances. Although George is not a part of the criminal activity in his firm he feels so incapable and stupid for having been deceived by his colleagues. Anna is feeling that her worrying about sex will scare her boyfriend away and the blame for losing him will fall on her shoulders.

Legitimation is the skill whereby the helper shows the person what they are not to blame for and what they are justified in feeling without guilt or recrimination. In Maltese legitimation is better explained as "turihom fejn ghandhom ragun".

Using this skill, the doctor can tell Anna: "Any responsible person would worry if they had sex when they were unprepared for it. I think your worrying shows a certain maturity on your part".

To George, the doctor might say: "Our human senses are limited George, if someone wants to hide something from you and is cunning enough they could outwit even the most observant of persons".

These comments help the patient to gain a sense of perspective and to realize that they are not dealing so badly with the problem after all. The most important effect is that after this

patients are better disposed to hear what they would not like to hear, that is their shortcomings and irresponsibilities (fejn m'ghandhomx ragun): for Anna the risk of AIDS and STD's, for George the serious consequences of his worrying and lack of rest.

Validation

This skill has to do with raising the patients' valuation of themselves. It consists of recognizing the value of the patient, helping them feel that they are worthwhile persons and showing them their strong points.

The doctor can validate Anna by telling her: "Despite the fact that you gave in to your boyfriend, you seem to have certain values in your life which point out your mistakes to you. This is an important quality to have".

To George: "Well George, if you worry so much it must be that you must care a great deal both for your work and your family. If you did not care, perhaps you would not worry".

Validation has the effect of boosting patients' self-esteem and self-confidence. It increases and makes possible their resolve to comply with what are sometimes very difficult prescriptions of the doctor: to stop smoking, to lose weight, to change one's lifestyle, to have an operation, etc.

These are the basic skills that can be utilized in the doctor-patient relationship. There are others, such as Empowerment, where patients are encouraged to take responsibility for their health and be active rather than passive in their healing process. These skills stem from a patient-centred philosophy of medicine. Their disadvantage is that they are more time consuming than merely diagnosing and treating in an impersonal manner. Their advantage is that the patient leaves the consulting room with

hope and confidence, while the doctor has the satisfaction of knowing that he has not only treated the body, but also the mind and the soul. As a result of this the healing process will be that much more extensive and lasting.

Empowerment

Your health is in your hands not mine. Turn passivity to activity (ensures that patient will not only take medication) but also take advice – a crucial part of treatment.

Research shows that the attitude towards illness is an important part of the cure.

How to empower:

Savoire model. Ultimately these are gimmicks until they become an attitude. Some attitudes behind these skills are: the practice of patient centred medicine, non-chemical treatment and preventive medicine, respect for human beings and their experiences.

