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## Importance of healthcare dietitians' communication skills

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### ABSTRACT

*The nutritional professional competency and the communication competency together are very important for a dietitian to provide quality nutritional care to the patients. Dietitians provide nutrition counselling to patients and it is very important that Dietitians should master the art of communication. This article stresses the need and importance of possessing good communication skills by dietitians who are an integral part of the patients' treatment care.*

**Keywords**— *Communication skills, Healthcare dietitian, Nutrition*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The term "Communication" is derived from a Latin word "Communis" which means common understanding between the Sender and the Receiver. Communication is a process of transformation of information from one person to another. To understand better about communication, it is a personal process, which occurs between people, which involves a change in behaviour and it is an effective means to influence others.

Good and effective communication between the health professionals and the patients during their treatment journey in the hospital determines patient satisfaction. Communication issues are a common area of healthcare service complaints. Good communication skills of dietitians provide emotional comfort to the patients as nutrition education is an important aspect of medical nutrition therapy. Dietitians require utmost communication skills when it comes to providing nutritional counselling to patients. When a patient does not understand the information given by the dietitian, the time spent in interacting with the patient becomes futile. It is extremely important for healthcare providers to consider the communication skills of the dietitians and continually review their communication approach. As a dietitian, being part of the healthcare team, while it is extremely important to possess sound knowledge and good clinical skills to provide patient nutrition care, it becomes more important to have good communication skills to disseminate the information to the patients. The most important thing a dietitian should possess is higher standards of communication skills because they deal with patients to influence dietary changes.

### 2. COMMUNICATION TYPES

Basically, there are two types of communication namely non-verbal and verbal. Non-verbal communication plays a major role than verbal communication. For that matter of any type of communication, attitude is very important. Let's now see the non-verbal communication and verbal communication in detail.

#### 2.1 Non-Verbal

Attitude decides destiny. A dietitian who deals with patients should come to work with a positive attitude. Non-verbal communication starts actually even before the dietitian and the patient actually engage in a verbal conversation. Dietitian's body gestures, facial expressions make a lot of difference and that day's intervention will solely depend on his / her attitude. A person's body language is easily picked up, the patient and his / her acceptance to the treatment/counselling will depend on it. A smile thrown on the patient provides inkling on the positive attitude of the dietitian and their approachability. It is very important that every healthcare dietitian possess this skill and keep honing it further. Etiquette of a dietitian is more than just good manners as it establishes respectable relationships with patients and their relatives. Being kind and empathetic goes a long way in gaining a patient's confidence. The way the dietitian receives the patient, courtesy and respect shown towards patients goes a long way in making the patient comfortable and it allows the patients to express more and interact more with the dietitian bringing in a better positive outcome.

### **2.1.1 Strategies for an effective non-verbal delivery**

- Posture
- Movement
- Gestures
- Facial expression
- Appearance

### **2.1.2 Improving on Body Language**

- Keep an appropriate distance
- Touch only when appropriate
- Take care of your appearance
- Maintain eye contact
- Smile genuinely

## **2.2 Verbal**

Verbal communication is nothing but sharing information through speech. It is important that healthcare dietitian need to effectively use verbal communication. The communication that is engaged with patients in a healthcare setup is called Therapeutic Communication. Interpersonal skills between the dietitian and the patient deems mandatory to influence the patient as well as enables patients to express their feelings in a better way. To reduce the patient's apprehension and make them feel at ease, it becomes extremely important for the dietitians to possess strong verbal communication skills. The way the dietitian speaks should attract the attention of the patients and their relatives. The basic rules of communication should come into place i.e. not speaking too fast or speaking too slow. The dietitian should use the correct pace of communication which allows time for the patients to understand what the dietitian explains. The unique and central purpose of dietetic and nutrition professionals is to translate nutrition knowledge into nutrition lifestyle. Ultimately, in verbal communication, the dietitian should be able to gain patients attention when they speak, should be able to speak clearly in a normal tone of voice and should avoid using too many medical words that patient cannot understand.

### **2.2.1 Tips to make communication effective**

- Clarity in message
- Completeness of message
- Understand the needs of the receiver
- Use appropriate channels (mike, audiovisuals etc)
- Consistency & Repetition

### **2.2.2 Listening and empowering patients**

The very important part of communication is active listening to what the patient says. Dietitians should encourage patients to share information they feel is necessary for their visit. It is not that Dietitians speak/explain about the diet and patient listens. Dietitians play a major role in imparting nutrition knowledge to patients and emphasize skills the patients should have to manage or overcome their disease condition through diet. Dietitians counselling should be reassuring to the patients.

### **2.2.3 Barriers (Language and Time)**

Communication produces meaningful interaction between two or more people. However, there are many barriers which come in the way of communication. Amongst which the most common barrier for a Healthcare Dietitian is the language. More communication happens when the dietitian and the patient speak the same language. On the contrary, very little communication happens when there is an absence of a common language between the dietitian and the patient. For diet counselling, it is very important that the counselling dietitian speaks the language that the patient can understand. Learning many new languages may not be practically possible and also very cumbersome for a dietitian. However, a dietitian should be familiar with the language that most of the patients visit their hospital. The interpreter will be of great help when Dietitians face such language barriers. Time is a barrier for dietitians as, within the stipulated time, dietitians have to counsel the patients. Hence, dietitians should be proficient with the subject knowledge so that with the given time, they should be able to provide diet counselling which should be professional and should be understood by the patient.

### **2.2.4 Essentials of effective communication**

- Positive and pleasant approach
- Good tone, accurate modulation
- Clarity of purpose and objective behind diet counselling
- Adequate knowledge of disease condition
- Greater emphasis to "YOU" facilitates the flow of information without interruption
- Following appropriate courteousness while communicating

### **2.2.5 Do's while communication**

- Think before speaking
- Use simple words that patients can understand
- Increase knowledge on all subjects required to speak
- Speak clearly and audibly

### **2.2.6 Don'ts while communication**

- Don't use medical terms not understood by the majority of people
- Neither speaks too fast or too slow
- Don't speak in noisy surroundings
- Do not get distracted while listening to patients.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

Dealing with patients always provides a great sense of satisfaction. It is very important for Healthcare Dietitians to master the art of communication. For many, it comes very easily, for others the art needs to be learnt. On the whole, good communication skills signify professional competency of dietitians and it is strongly recognized that effective communication skills of the dietitians benefit patients. The golden rule is better communication, better acceptance and improved compliance.

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