

# **A Touch of Humanity**

*By Lynn Homisak, PRT*



**AAPP**  
AMERICAN ACADEMY OF  
PODIATRIC PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

10 Maple Street, Suite 301  
Middleton, MA 01949

978-646-9091

978-646-9092 fax

office@aappm.org

www.aappm.org

## A Touch of Humanity (for effective communication)

The art of communicating in today's fast-paced world of medicine, like anything else, demands a certain "strategy" in order to build patient relationships that award you success . . . A strategy that involves (among other things) good ethics, effective practice management skills and yes . . . a touch of humanity. One of the most commanding components in the delivery of quality patient care is the ongoing connection that exists between the patient and the practice. With specific emphasis on a positive attitude, improving listening techniques and high impact communication skills, this connection can be further strengthened and enhanced.

Remembering the Golden Rule, it becomes easy to keep perspective on the simplistic rules of humanity. One offshoot of this rule might be . . . "Whatever you dish out . . . bounces back." The good (or the bad) part of that is that USUALLY, it comes back with greater force and more intensity. Thus, putting yourself on both the giving AND receiving end of that formula allows you to *literally* have a taste of your own medicine. For example, if you act in a courteous manner and respect your patients, your actions are repaid in kindness back to you. On the same hand, if you are abusive and deceitful, beware . . . for the payback will match the offense and the sting you receive could be twice as painful.

This "bounce-back" return is a common example of attitude in action. Attitude is the feeling or psychological response (based on genetics and life experiences) that motivates one to place importance (or unimportance) on things. As different as people are . . . so are their attitudes. The practice management strategy that steps in here is knowing how to not only "deal with" patient attitudes just enough to get by, but to work compassionately with them in a way that ultimately ends up being beneficial and positive. The expression . . . "What goes around . . . comes around" has no hidden meaning. Conquer the patient with humanity and revel in the return of your good deeds. Treat the patient in discourteous ways and be prepared to DUCK . . . because when it bounces back . . . you will want to stay clear of the aftereffects of that blow. Simply stated...if you want to be inspired by your staff, your doctors or your co-workers, be their inspiration and if you want to be respected by your patients . . . respect them first. Compliment your own attitude by surrounding yourself with like-minded personalities and people who think as you do. Finally, because attitude adjustment starts with your own willingness to make a change, learn from your own experiences. If something doesn't go the way you want it to . . . take hold of it, turn it around and use it constructively, so the next time the outcome is nothing less than productive. Knowing that you possess the power to choose . . . what attitude would YOU like to have bounce back and hit YOU? It is your own attitude that reflects the environment of your practice . . . and it is the attitude of your practice that holds the keys to your own fortune.

The second rule of humanity is the gift of listening. Not just hearing . . . but *pro active listening*. One of the most powerful of our human needs is to be acknowledged and feel appreciated and it is through pro active listening that this can be accomplished. The hallmark of great customer service is the ability to empathize with patients and to see things from their personal perspective. Empathy begins with understanding through listening. You've heard it said many times over . . . if we were meant to speak more than we listen, we would have two mouths and one ear. Maybe, based on that principle, the concept of listening being twice as hard as speaking is not far-fetched. By actively listening to our patients, we can discover what their true needs are . . . and take action in terms of finding ways to satisfy them. We can show them that we are interested in what they have to say and in doing so, encourage an open, clearer dialogue. Listening allows the patient more freedom to ask questions, and allows us to focus more intently on their concerns.

Listening to others reaps great rewards . . .

- ...they listen to YOU in return
- ...you acquire more knowledgeable and accurate information
- ...you will gain trust
- ...it improves personal and professional relationships
- ...it causes fewer mistakes (and a reduced work load from having to correct them.)
- ...it enhances employee relations and retention

As an effective listener, you'll learn quickly that wisdom has two parts . . . having a lot to say . . . and not saying it. If this cliché is true . . . that one has the ability to "open mouth and insert foot," then the upside down alternative . . . "a closed mouth gathers no foot" . . . might carry even greater significance.

Obviously, we cannot go through life with a "closed mouth" for fear of what might come out. So, when it does become time to talk, it is safe to say that the words we carefully choose will also play a role in the outcome of our communication. There is a documented theory that communication is in fact only 40% verbal, and other components such as eye contact, body language, voice intonation, volume and inflection, make up the remaining 60%. While all three factors work together to make the communication circle complete, it is in the sometimes-chaotic world of the medical office that the verbal component becomes substantially more important. The first thing that happens is that the patient HEARS what you say. Think back to when you needed to explain something to the patient. You may have thought your words were clear enough to convey the message; however, their perception may have easily distorted your words, causing them to misinterpret it completely. If the patient does not ask for clarification, this mis-communication could spiral into a negative result and they could leave your practice dissatisfied . . . without your ever realizing what happened. To make matters worse, they suddenly could become very vocal about their experience, unjustly marring your reputation. This scenario probably happens more times than we realize; indicating that our words and the "delivery" of them is something that may require more personalized attention.

Information can easily be dispensed through literature . . . however, it is the complex and multi-sensory human quality, once again, that allows people the unique ability to "communicate." How can we communicate to the patient the information they need to know in a way they are assured of understanding it? Think humanity. How would YOU feel if the situation was reversed? The strategic key is to consider putting yourself in their shoes and help them understand what it is that you are trying to relate in the clearest, most sensible way. Start by taking your most frequent discussions (you know . . . the overly explained referral process, an explanation of benefits, various office policies, etiology of common disorders, reasons for appointment schedule delays, etc.) . . . dissect them to determine if they can be misinterpreted in any way . . . and then "can" them in such a way that every response you make is nothing less than a perfect script. Like any script, don't forget that they need plenty of rehearsing. Tape them, analyze them and then try them out on coworkers. Do they sound natural and genuine, or do they come across as sounding technical and trite? Finally, combine them with the 60% communicational components to add that extra human touch . . . such as a warm smile, attentive body language, calming facial expressions and vocal inflections and you'll be surprised at the impact you've created . . . and more importantly the positive results of your efforts.

A career in healthcare today promises to be a challenging one, but through careful and attentive listening skills, high impact communication skills and a healthy "bounce-back" attitude, you can create an environment that is very satisfying to your patients. The strategy is simple . . . and requires only *a touch of humanity* to make it work. Just stop and consider the possible consequences. Will **YOU** be ready and willing to accept that which "bounces back?" If it's done right . . . you should be PROUD to!