NTU and Tan Tock Seng Hospital's joint study aims to improve doctor-patient communication

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Researchers from Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (NTU Singapore) and clinicians at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) have worked together in a joint study to look at doctor-patient communication can be improved.

The research team is one of the first groups in Singapore to use Conversation Analysis – a method for studying social interactions – in a hospital setting.

In Conversation Analysis, video recordings of interactions in an authentic setting are transcribed verbatim.

Researchers analyse the verbal and non-verbal aspects during each person's turn to talk. They would pay attention to context and identify recurring patterns of interaction, NTU said in a press statement.

Compared to retrospective interviews and surveys commonly used in health communication studies, this method provides richer insights. Researchers will be able to give clinicians specific recommendations in terms of what to say, and how to say it at a specific point.
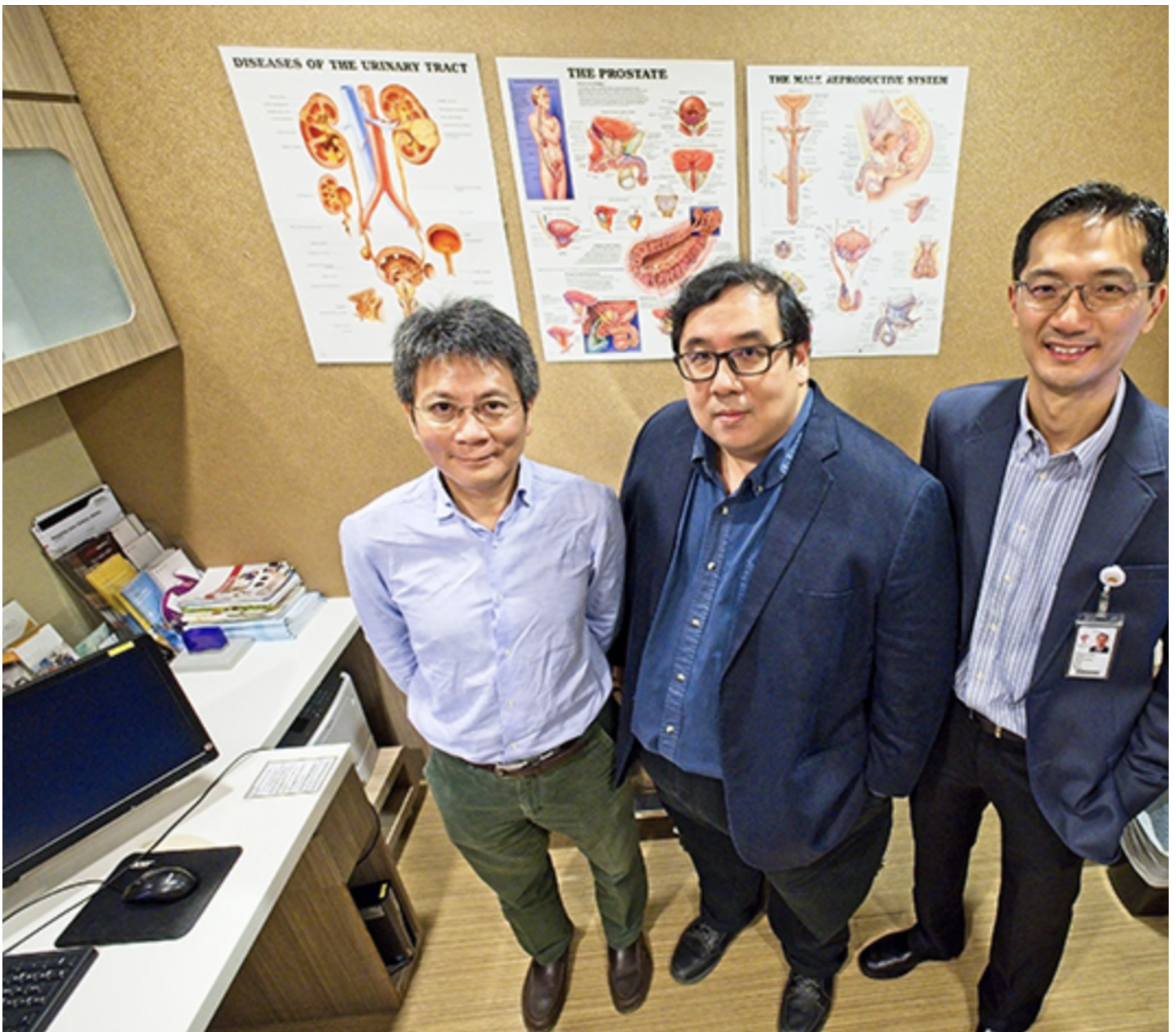
Photo courtesy: NTU

For example, when addressing a patient's concern about pain during a procedure, just explaining the use of anaesthetics may not be enough to reduce the fear. Instead, the doctor can share what his past patients said about their experience.

The study involved an analysis of 150 doctor-patient conversations at TTSH's Urology clinics. It was led by Professor Luke Kang Kwong Kapathy and Assistant Professor Lim Ni Eng, both from NTU School of Humanities, in collaboration with Adjunct Assistant Professor Png Keng Siang, Senior Consultant, Department of Urology, TTSH.

The research outcomes are expected to shape the design of medical communication modules for training of future urologists in TTSH.

"Conversation Analysis is a fresh look into communication in healthcare which doctors were not previously exposed to. We are excited that our day-to-day doctor-patient interactions can shed so much insight through the use of this novel approach," said Adjunct Asst Prof Png Keng Siang.

"Current medical education already includes communication training, but we want to go a step further in looking at the actual interactions in the clinics," explained Prof Luke, who is the Chair, School of Humanities, and Associate Dean (Research), College of Humanities, Arts, & Social Sciences at NTU.

"Studying the languages, responses and social psychology in the clinical setting gives us insights on what makes patients more receptive to doctors' recommendations. This may lead to patients being more willing to go through necessary tests and increased patient satisfaction," he added.