Analysis of doctor-patient communications to help shape future of doctor-patient communication training

A joint study by researchers from Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (NTU) Singapore and chicks at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) has yielded insights into how doctors can better communicate the value of clinical investigations to patients.

The study, which is the first by the group of researchers in Singapore to use Conversation Analysis, a method for studying social interaction, in a hospital setting.

In Conversation Analysis, video recordings of interactions in an authentic setting are transcribedverbatim. Researchers analyse the verbal and non-verbal aspects during each participants turn to talk, paying attention to context and identifying recurring patterns of interaction.

This micro-analysis is richer in insights compared to retrospective interviews and surveys commonly used in health communication studies. Researchers can subsequently give clinicians specific recommendations in terms of what to say, and how to say it at a specific point, in order to enhance the communication process.

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

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

The study involved an analysis of 150 doctor-patient conversations at TTSH. 180 video clips were coded by Professor Luke Kang Kwok Kapaly and Assistant Professor Lim Eng (both from NTU School of Humanities, in collaboration with Assistant Professor Peng Kang Sang, Senior Consultant, Department of Ultrasound, TTSH). “Conversation Analysis is a fresh look into communication in healthcare which doctors were not previously exposed to, that revealed that everyday doctors-patients interactions can shed so much insight through the use of this novel approach, said Adjunct Associate Prof Peng Kang Sang.

Current medical education already includes communication training, but we want to go a step further. This study is thus a fresh look into the training of the doctors. Studying the languages, responses and social psychology in the clinical setting gives us insights on what makes patients more receptive to doctors’ recommendations, which may lead to patients being more receptive to doctors’ guidance and improved patient satisfaction,” said Prof Luke, who is the Chair, School of Humanities, and Associate Dean (Research), College of Humanities, Arts & Social Sciences at NTU.

Richer insights

The study involved filming 150 first visit consultations at TTSH ultrasound clinics. A preliminary study involving 50 patients and three ultrasound consultants started in July 2018.

From the initial findings, a larger study involving 100 patients and clinicians from the ultrasonic department was conducted from mid-2017 to mid-2018. Patients had given their written consent to participate in this research project, which was approved by National Healthcare Group’s ethics review board.

A common reason for patients to be referred to Ultrasound clinics is the presence of blood in the urine. As this can be caused by various reasons, a first-visit consultation often involves the recommendation of various diagnostic procedures, in order to pinpoint the exact cause behind the symptom. These may include a urinal test, renal ultrasound, as well as cystoscopy, which involves running a tiny tube with aFlashlight through the urethra.

Occurring scenarios include patients’ expression of fear towards cystoscopy, and apprehension towards going through multiple tests. To enhance the communication, doctors may be more aware of patients’ subconsciously sign of fear. To patients who may view the tests as being optional, they can also explain up-front that all the tests are needed to pinpoint the exact cause behind the symptoms, before going into test details.

NTU and Prof Lim said, “Your study does bring up the question of how much patients know or do not know about the various medical procedures when they enter the clinic. How this knowledge affects patients’ interactions with doctors and their decision-making process can be further studied.”

Throughout 2018, the research team had presented their findings at several international conferences such as the Singapore Public Health & Occupational Medicine Conference, the International Symposium on Healthcare Communication, and the Global Health Innovation Summit jointly organized by the World Health Organization and Sri Lanka’s government.

NTU and Tan Tock Seng Hospital have been collaborating in advancing patient care through their engagement in the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine and Health City Novena.

The NTU team is part of a medical humanities research cluster at the university, which looks at how social factors and cultural differences drive the practice of medical practice.

Other ongoing projects by the team include enhancing communication in TTSH’s Ophthalmology clinics and in the training of medical students. The researchers also aim to apply Conversation Analysis in palliative care in future.

Source:
http://www.ntu.edu.sg/home/medialaw.aspx