

Listen to Your Doctor

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As I was leaving the office, I mentioned to my secretary that I had to write my monthly article this weekend, and I had to decide what to write about. "Listening to your doctor," she quickly replied. The more I thought about the idea, the more I liked it. This is not meant to be a lecture, but rather a plea to patients to try to improve part of their role in doctor-patient communication.

Listening to your doctor has two equally important connotations: paying careful attention so that you hear exactly what he or she has to say *and* following the instructions given to you by your doctor. Although I think my secretary's initial thoughts, after a week on the phone repeating instructions, had to do with the first, the second is equally important.

It is difficult for patients to remember what they are told when they are in a doctor's office. There have been many studies done of the informed consent process, where patients are told about an operation or treatment that is being proposed, and the risks and benefits thereof. Virtually all of these studies find that the patients do not hear or remember much of what is being told to them. It may be nervousness on the part of the patient, fear about their medical problem or illness, or denial. There may also be some component of not paying attention.

Various methods have been tried to overcome this problem, which often involve giving the patient written material that they can take home to review. However, sometimes when I ask a patient after surgery whether they have followed my instructions for post-operative care, which are given in oral and *written* form, I learn that they have not even looked at the written instruction sheet they have been given. If the patient does not read materials they are given, how can they know what they are being told?

Often when I am explaining proposed surgery or a treatment plan to a patient, it seems that they are so busy trying to formulate questions while I am speaking that they don't listen to what I am saying. If they did, they would probably find that I have answered their question during the explanation process.

My suggestions: Listen carefully to what the doctor is saying. Take notes if you have to. Carefully read any written materials that you have been given. And ask questions so that you are clear about what you are being told, but first pay careful attention to the explanation before formulating your questions.

What about following instructions? I try to carefully explain to patients what I want them to do during home treatments, or after surgery. I like to think that I have good reasons for what I recommend. However, to the non-medical person, these recommendations may make no sense, or may seem arbitrary (or even designed to cramp their lifestyle). So if the doctor's instructions do not make sense to you, ask why you are supposed to do these things. Your doctor should have an explanation of why this should help you. It is much easier to follow directions if you know why you are following them.

The most important instructions to follow are often the ones that seem to severely alter your lifestyle. I am reminded of a recent patient who spent ten days in the hospital in bed after her third operation because she had not followed her doctor's instructions after her first and second operations. She had had her knee replaced, and her Orthopedic Surgeon had urged her to elevate her leg in bed to combat swelling, and to wear a brace so that her knee did not bend and stress the area where the skin had been sewed back together. An active person, she disregarded these instructions, even when told of the potentially catastrophic implications for her knee and leg, and was out and about with a swollen, non-healing leg. When a doctor tells you to severely alter your lifestyle for important reasons, listen carefully, and make sure you understand. It is you, not the doctor, who will suffer the consequences if you do otherwise.

As a closing thought, I am in no way saying that I or any other physician am perfect in explaining things to patients. Doctors who understand all this medical stuff and live and breathe it daily often don't realize that their explanations are not clear to non-doctors. So after I or any doctor tell you something to which you have listened carefully, and it still doesn't make sense to you, ask questions. Make sure that you understand what you are being told, and why you should do it. If you don't, stay longer, or call, or make a follow-up appointment to discuss it again. But first do your part by listening carefully.