

Tip #17: Communicating with Low Health Literacy Patients

The Risk: The lay public often has limited knowledge and understanding of medical terminology. A patient's ability to understand medical information may be compounded by stress, age, illness, and language or cultural barriers. Effective communication with patients may improve compliance with treatment regimens, enhance the informed consent process, and increase safe medication use. Physician office practices can improve the patient experience, and reduce potential liability exposure, by employing the following recommendations.

Recommendations:

1. Use lay terminology whenever possible. Define technical terms with simple language. Patient education materials should be written in plain language, avoiding the use of medical jargon.
2. Verbal instructions may be reinforced with visual aids and printed materials that are easy to read and include pictures, models, and illustrations. Consider using non-printed materials, such as videos and audio recordings, as indicated.
3. Offer to assist your patients when completing new patient information or any other practice documents. Provide this help in a confidential way, preferably in an area that is private and conducive to this type of information exchange. Encourage your patients to contact you with any further questions.
4. The use of interpreters may be indicated for patients who are not fluent in the English language.
5. At the end of the encounter, use open ended questions rather than yes/no questions to further assess patient understanding. Instead of asking "Do you have any questions?" try asking "What questions do you have for me?"
6. Providers and staff should be familiar with and utilize the principles of the "teach back method" when reviewing new medications or treatment plans with patients. First teach a concept, then ask patients to repeat back the information they just heard using their own words.
7. Patients and family members may be embarrassed by, or unaware of, their healthcare literacy deficits. An empathetic approach to understanding patient health literacy will enhance your physician-patient relationship.