
Risk Pearls: March 2017

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One of the simplest tools for improving your communication with patients is intentional or "active" listening. When a new mother brings her baby to the office, listening to her description of the problem often provides that subtle clue a physical examination may not have revealed. Not all medical interactions require intervention; listening may be the only care needed. Keep in mind that patient experience surveys measure patients' perspectives of care by asking "How often did your doctors/nurses listen carefully to you?" Active listening sounds easy, but in today's medical environment, you may be tempted to "short cut" time allowed for listening; you may listen only for the responses that fit the questions being asked or to complete a template, thereby missing critical information. EHRs can be a barrier to active listening. By facing the patient and maintaining eye contact, you have more opportunity to "hear" the patient. Listening requires effort on the part of the practice in order to structure patient interactions that allow for open communication. Look at your questionnaires to see if they lead only to "yes" or "no" responses. If so, change the questions to make them more open-ended. Listening also requires the discipline to hear what is being said without immediately formulating a response. From the initial patient call requesting an appointment to your end of visit summary, each step in the patient experience involves listening attentively to ensure effective communication and quality care.

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