

## Introduction (part 1)

# Thank you for listening: Why consultation skills are so important

What are the benefits of improved consultation skills for clinicians and patients?

### **Better consultation skills make consultations more medically accurate, safer and more satisfying for patients and clinicians**

We live in a changing world. In a post Covid environment, consultations frequently happen using telephones, by video link or even by the exchange of emails, as well as in person. This complexity means that effective consultation skills are more important than ever, to ensure accurate clinical assessment, safe collaborations with patients and to enable us to harness the power of caring in all our clinical encounters.

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### **“Offer patients your undivided attention with good intention.”**

— BMJ 2020;371:m4100

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Around us, so called ‘chatbots’ claim to make diagnoses, while scans, blood tests, monitors and genomics jostle into the space of clinical reasoning. Clinical decision making seems to be taken over by protocols and guidelines, which promise to help us choose amongst a bewildering range of therapeutic choices. This can seem distant from the experience of a one to one consultation in an office.

Yet, everyday about a million consultations take place in primary care settings alone, with many others happening in hospital settings. It is clear that patients value effective consultations very highly, just as they feel let down, disappointed and dismissive of poor consultations.

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### **“Thank you for listening.”**

— The best feedback a clinician can hear

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When a patient says “*Thank you for listening*” or “*Thank you for helping me through this situation*”, they are placing a very high value on the **process** of the consultation, as well as on the achievement of the **tasks** of the consultation. When a patient says “*Thank you for listening*” it tells us that something very significant has happened; the encounter has gone beyond being a transaction, and has also become a relationship between two people. When the clinician forms an effective relationship, whether as part of a single consultation or part of a series of consultations over time, the interaction moves from being a two dimensional one like a snapshot, to being a three dimensional one, like a novel or a film. This definitely makes for more enriching experiences for both parties. Research clearly shows that this approach also gives better clinical outcomes; improved wound healing, better blood pressure and blood sugar control are just some examples of this.

To some, consultation skills are just a luxury ‘add-on’ that need extra time and are less important than clinical knowledge. Isn’t getting the right diagnosis and choosing the right treatment the really important thing?

## Actually, the interpersonal value of the consultation cannot be separated from the process of ‘doing the clinical work’

Accurate diagnosis and assessment rely on the patient’s contribution being heard, understood and acted on appropriately. Facilitating effective communication between clinician and patient needs nuanced, interpersonal skills. Successful treatment is more likely if a patient collaborates fully in their own care. In turn, that is more likely when the patient trusts their clinician and feels treated as a person, with unique qualities, constraints and concerns. When there is effective communication and trust, the patient is more likely to share important clinical information, and will be better able to understand and act on explanations from clinicians.

Moreover, combining ‘science with caring’, treating people with empathy and kindness, has been clearly shown to improve clinical outcomes, at lower cost, while also reducing clinician burnout. It turns out we enjoy caring for others and feel better as clinicians when we have good relationships with our patients. (See Reference 1 – *Skills for Communicating with Patients*, and Reference 2 – *Compassionomics*). There is a full reference list in the [LIBRARY](#) module.

## Here are some examples of how medical accuracy and effectiveness follow from highly developed consultation skills:

### Making an effective diagnosis...

An online symptom checker can discover that a patient with arm pain has no redness, no swelling, a full range of movement and no chest pain. What the clinician hears and notices makes a more accurate assessment. This patient consults very rarely (does a Chatbot appreciate the significance of this?), and works as a scaffolder.

Good **rapport and relationship building skills** from the clinician generates trust, so that the patient shares that he has been avoiding work because of the pain, saying “*but I am not workshy doctor!*” Although not red or restricted, the joint is exquisitely painful. This anomalous fact, in a hardworking man who never takes time off, means that these **clues and cues** are picked up by the listening clinician, signalling that there is something important going on. Investigations revealed TB of the joint.

### Enabling effective and appropriate management...

A young woman complains of not being able to swallow her dinner. Is this really dysphagia? She is healthy, has a stable weight and is working full time. **Undivided attention** to the whole picture and effective **relationship building skills** enable the clinician to interpret what she is saying as “*sounds like something is sticking in your throat*”. The patient reveals her fury at her violent ex-partner. He is trying to muscle his way back into her new independent life. The difficulty in swallowing disappears immediately after the consultation.

### Ensuring safe care over time...

A middle aged man consults saying “*it is probably a cold doc, but I need a sick note for work*”. He has a sore throat and hoarseness. Seen in isolation, this seems like a URTI. The clinician picks up on his casual dismissal of the symptoms, but has the self-awareness not to join in. Coding ‘hoarseness’ in the notes, and using effective **safety netting skills**, means that when the hoarse voice does not resolve, the patient consults again quickly and appropriate referral and investigations follow.

These examples show that clinicians with high levels of consultation skills are more effective. In other words, such skills help clinicians do their job better. This is because more and better quality information is brought to bear on the clinical problem, because the patient’s contribution is skilfully encouraged and attended to fully.

A further big bonus is that effective skills also make consultations more efficient. This means they are faster and get more done, in less time. This is less stressful and more satisfying to both patients and clinicians. Work becomes more enjoyable and less draining for clinicians. Getting positive feedback from patients is energising and encouraging after all. This really is a win-win situation with benefits for clinicians and patients alike.

Effective consultation skills can be employed in every setting including secondary care and tertiary care and are needed by anyone who works with patients.

Consulting well is a skill for a whole professional life, not just for training, or an examination, and most clinicians will need to attend to the continuous development of these skills. Reading more widely over time can really help to deepen understanding and develop specific useful skills. The complexity of the consultation and the powerful therapeutic effect of a skilful clinician is a strong motivation to continue to study, practice and improve consultation skills throughout professional life. Clinicians and patients alike reap the benefits... and we will all become patients ourselves in the end.

1 *Skills for Communicating with Patients* – Kurtz, Silverman and Draper.

7 *Compassionomics: The Revolutionary Scientific Evidence That Caring Makes a Difference* – Tzeciak and Mazzei.