

Communication: What's the Big Deal?

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One might ask: why make a big deal about communicating? Like breathing, isn't that something we all do automatically? We think. We speak. We listen. We respond. Simple? Not so simple! In fact, communication is the subject of much study for it often reflects much more than ideas. It reflects, among other things, social structure. The ways we talk with our doctors, for instance, reflects the social structure of the doctor-patient relationship. Or, as some would say¹, it reflects the distribution of power in the relationship. As described in our last issue, doctor-patient relationships in America are in transition -- with a shift of power (in theory at least) from the physician to the patient and a growing push for yet another shift to a more equal sharing of the power.

Doctor-patient communication is especially complicated these days by the changes that have occurred in our healthcare system. While we still talk about decisionmaking as if it is totally within the realm of doctors and patients, many patients have become painfully aware that managed care plans may have the last say. Nevertheless, it remains important for doctors and patients to communicate in ways that enable them to arrive at mutually agreeable healthcare decisions. For many people, though, this type of communication is not something that will occur automatically. It will not be like breathing. First and foremost, doctors and patients will need to stop acting automatically and give some thought to what they want from each other. After all, it's hard to achieve something if we don't know what we want to achieve. Having figured this out, however, the next step is to share it with one another. This may take several forms. One form may be an up front discussion of expectations, another may be a bit-by-bit process in which expectations are shared as the need to do so arises during a medical encounter. In either case, this is likely to be breaking new ground and, for a while at least, to be a work in progress -- with expectations, relationships, and communication patterns developing as one goes along.

¹ Howard Brody. *The Healer's Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

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