

The Future of Trust in the Doctor-Patient Relationship

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There was a time when people tended to think that doctors were all knowing, omnipotent, medical authorities and, because of this, could be trusted to know and do what was right for their patients. On the part of doctors, this often meant that they expected their patients to follow treatment recommendations without questioning their validity. On the part of patients, there was often a certain comfort in placing themselves in their doctors hands and saying, in essence, "OK, you take care of everything. The problem is now yours to deal with." After all, when people we respect suggest that we sit back and let them fix our problems for us, it's awfully hard to resist the temptation to do so. This is especially true when we may be feeling under par because of an illness -- even more so when we know little of medicine.

If you are among those who liked feeling able to trust that doctors will know and do what is right, then you may be feeling a bit out of sorts these days. It's very disconcerting, after all, to learn that doctors, like everyone else, are not perfect; that they do not know everything; that they can miss things; and that, despite good intentions, can make mistakes. And what are you to think when, for these very reasons, organizations such as the American Heart Association, the National Institute on Aging, and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality urge patients – you – to form partnerships with your doctors and take an active part in the decisionmaking process. Doesn't this imply that patients cannot, should not, trust that their doctors will know and do the right thing?

Actually, that's not quite what they are saying. Even if doctors don't know everything, what they do know is still substantial and worthy of both respect and trust. Patients are simply being advised to replace a blind trust in their doctors with one that is grounded in respect, yet recognizes the fallibility of humans. Patients are being advised to replace expectations that are based on illusions, with ones that are based on reality.

By telling patients to be partners in their healthcare, to learn what they can and help make the decisions, these and other organizations are also suggesting that patients can, and should, shoulder some of the responsibility for their care *and* for the nature of the relationship. This, in turn, implies that the future of trust in healthcare relationships need not be limited to trust in doctors. It implies that you, the patient, should trust in yourself as well.

Even though you may start out knowing little or nothing about the medical aspects of your condition, you can learn enough to make decisions. You should trust yourself enough to ask questions and seek answers. Because you are the one who lives with your condition on a daily basis, what you know *and think* about it is important. You should trust yourself

enough to share both -- especially if the doctor's sense of things conflicts with yours. Either of you may be right, or wrong, and conversation can help you both figure that out.

The important thing to remember is that, whether the knowledge and/or opinion is yours or your doctor's, the trust we're talking about here is a respectful one that values the input of the other as being worthy of consideration, even if it ultimately gets rejected. This means worthy of being questioned and scrutinized.

Something else that can be trusted in doctor-patient relationships is the process of shared decisionmaking. When doctors and patients do not automatically dismiss the input of the other, when they subject that input to scrutiny, the process can help with decisionmaking. It also can help in catching mistakes and reducing the risk of harm and injury associated with those mistakes.

Much as we might hope, though, unwelcome things can happen even when people do everything right. Which is why trust in *the process* should also not be blind. As such, we need to understand that the process of shared decisionmaking offers no guarantees of desired outcomes. It merely provides a context for both parties to do the best they can. And that, alone, would be doing a lot! The changing doctor-patient relationship, then, presents opportunities to expand the boundaries of trust. □

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