

Ask the Expert: Communication Skills

I've spent all of my career teaching, helping medical students and residents learn clinical skills with a special emphasis on communication skills.

On-screen: [Ann King, senior measurement scientist, growth and innovation. NBME]

Early in my career, I was at the University of Illinois School of Medicine and I had the opportunity to work with Reed Williams and develop a clinical performance center there using standardized patients.

On-screen: [Reed Williams, PHD.]

And we used the patients to teach and evaluate the medical students on clinical skills, which was their ability to take a history, do a physical exam, and communicate with the patient.

On-screen: [Communication skills: abilities that allow you to give and receive different types of information.]

And I just loved it. I found this field so exciting and so impactful in terms of helping students learn these skills.

On-screen: [What are the challenges in assessing communication skills?]

It's important to assess communication skills because they impact patient outcomes.

You know, oftentimes communication skills are referred to as soft skills, and I don't believe that. I think communicating with patients is difficult and hard. When you assess communication skills, it's challenging because it requires a different format. It requires them actually communicating with a patient, as opposed to, let's say, an MCQ or a multiple choice question.

The second challenge in assessing communication skills is defining what you mean by that. What do we mean by communication skills? It's really multifaceted. It's the ability to provide information in a clear manner to patients so that they can understand. It's the ability to elicit information from patients so that they know what you're asking. It's the ability to respond to their emotion, to use language that they will understand and to work with a patient to help them make decisions.

On-screen: [What is the most exciting insight you've learned?]

It is really exciting to work with medical school faculty and residency faculty, and hear their enthusiasm for the support of teaching and assessing communication skills. It's very validating.

It's also wonderful to see that when you work with students and you provide them feedback, they get better and they, they want to get better.

And I think lastly, when people hear about the work that I do, I'm privileged to hear stories about good communication they've had with their healthcare providers and sometimes not so good communication. And that's what motivates me to continue in this area of work.

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