

## COMUNICATION ISSUES AND CULTURAL LITERACY IN HEALTH CARE DELIVERY

### PROBLEMES DE COMMUNICATION ET COMPETENCES CULTURELLES DANS LE DOMAINE DE LA SANTE ET DE L'OFFRE DES SERVICES MEDICAUX

### PROBLEME DE COMUNICARE SI COMPETENTE CULTURALE IN DOMENIUL SANATATII SI AL FURNIZARII SERVICIILOR MEDICALE

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#### Abstract

*Cultural and language barriers associated with the health care communication strategies represent complex issues that may complicate situations. The importance of the physician-patient interaction is magnified by the cross-cultural circumstances. The way a message is conveyed is often overlooked having thus serious consequences and implications for both parties. Besides that, the prejudices one person has due to religious or cultural reasons may affect the whole health care delivery process. This article analyses some aspects related to the way clinicians communicate with the patients, emphasizes some misunderstandings that may occur and gives examples of sensitive issues encountered under such circumstances. It also sets forth the importance of the fast food culture and the impact it has had on the population's lifestyle.*

#### Résumé

*Les barrières culturelles et linguistiques associées aux stages de communication dans le domaine de la santé représentent des problèmes complexes qui peuvent déterminer l'apparition des situations compliquées. L'importance de l'interaction d'entre le médecin et le patient est argumentée par l'intermède des circonstances inter et intra-culturelles. La modalité dont un message est transmis est souvent ignorée en déterminant des conséquences et des implications graves pour les deux parties. En plus, les préjugés qu'une personne puisse avoir à cause des raisons de nature religieuse ou culturelle peuvent affecter toute la modalité de déroulement du processus médical. Cet article met en évidence quelques aspects liés du type de communication abordé par les médecins dans la relation avec les patients, en soulignant quelques malentendus qui peuvent apparaître. On analyse en même temps quelques sujets «incommodes» ou tabou avec lesquels les personnes impliquées se confrontent d'habitude. En partant de ces aspects communicationnels, l'épreuve surprend en même temps l'importance de la culture fast food et l'impacte de celle-ci sur l'interaction interhumaine médicale et sur le style de vie de la population.*

#### Rezumat

*Barierile culturale și lingvistice asociate cu strategiile de comunicare din domeniul sănătății reprezintă probleme complexe ce pot determina apariția unor situații complicate. Importanța interacțiunii dintre doctor și pacient este augmentată prin intermediul circumstanțelor inter și intra-culturale. Modul în care un mesaj este transmis este deseori ignorat ducând astfel la consecințe și implicații grave pentru ambele părți. Mai mult, prejudiciile pe care o persoană le-ar putea avea din cauza unor motive de natură religioasă sau culturală pot afecta întregul mod de desfășurare al procesului medical. Acest articol evidențiază câteva aspecte legate de tipul de*

*comunicare abordat de medici în relația cu pacienții, subliniind anumite neînțelegeri ce pot să apară. Totodată, sunt analizate câteva subiecte “incomode” sau tabuu cu care persoanele implicate de obicei se confruntă. Pornind de la aceste aspecte comunicaționale, lucrarea surprinde totodată importanța culturii fast food și impactul acesteia asupra interacțiunii interumane medicale și asupra stilului de viață al populației.*

**Key words:** *communication, medicine, culture, society, patient.*

**Mots clés:** *communication, médecine, culture, société, patient.*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *comunicare, medicina, cultura, societate, pacient.*

## **Communication and culture**

“Sickness” is what is happening to the patient. Listen to him. Disease is what is happening to science and to populations.” [1]

Communication is a process of conscious or unconscious transfer of information from one person to another. It is a phenomenon that involves senders and receivers who play different roles according to the type of interaction they approach. A message can be conveyed by means of face-to-face communication, through telephone or radio. Eye-contact, body language, the way a person dresses or acts can also represent a means of communication. The method of writing or visualizing certain charts or maps has become more and more popular nowadays due to the development of technology. However, whichever type of communication one may approach, be it oral, written or non-verbal the main purpose of the whole process is to make oneself understood. In order to achieve this, the encoded message travels from sender to receiver who eventually must decode it so as to be able to provide a proper feedback. Misunderstandings may occur at any moment, but a good interlocutor will find the best channel that will help the receiver perceive the proper message. In today’s society, characterized by speed and lack of time people often opt for communication channels like the email or socializing networks which provide instant feedback and are very cost-effective. The written channels have proved to be more useful for others who need time to assimilate and analyze the message.

Communication skills can improve all aspects of one’s life, from professional issues to cultural events. The ability to communicate effectively can improve considerably one’s existence. When applying for a job, for example, it is necessary to demonstrate good communication skills, to use a wide vocabulary, to listen effectively and to convey a clear and concise message. Interpersonal communication involves not only the spoken word but also, it relies to a great extent on gestures, signs and body language in general. However, the communicative process includes another essential aspect, that is listening. Unlike hearing, listening requires more complex skills like reflection and clarification. People often tend to overlook the qualities of a good listener being self-centered and forgetting that active listening means fully concentrating on what is being said. Interest must be maintained by eye contact, by nodding or smiling. It is not advisable to reply before fully understanding the message. Such actions most often lead to wrong assumptions and to misunderstandings. A breakdown in communication may occur especially when one has preconceived ideas or prejudices, different previous experiences, lack of interest, tiredness, certain feelings towards the interlocutor.

However, another major role in the communicative process belongs to culture, as it has been defined as a wide range of beliefs, knowledge, customs and other human behavior patterns acquired by the individual throughout one’s life. Generally speaking, the first idea that may come to one’s mind when discussing about culture is represented by traditions, language references or eating

habits that set apart one nation from another. Even though culture and society are two different things, the complex set of behavior patterns that a person acquires may be performed only within the frame of a society. As emphasized in a study entitled Multicultural Education, “Most social scientists today view culture as consisting primarily of the symbolic, ideational, and intangible aspects of human societies. The essence of a culture is not its artifacts, tools, or other tangible cultural elements but how the members of the group interpret, use, and perceive them. It is the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in modernized societies; it is not material objects and other tangible aspects of human societies. People within a culture usually interpret the meaning of symbols, artifacts, and behaviors in the same or in similar ways.” [2] The branch of linguistics also plays a major role in human interaction and behavior as it is connected to many disciplines in the humanities and not only. It is focused on the origins of languages, on how they are learned, on the relationship between language and culture.

### **Intercultural misunderstandings and the health care awareness culture**

Intercultural communication on the other hand, involves people of different background, of different cultural origins. It requires three important attributes: skills, knowledge and attitudes because it has often been regarded as an interdisciplinary field. Intercultural competence requires both linguistic and communicative skills, sociology and anthropology knowledge. A lack of such competences may result in poor communication and misunderstandings, in uncomfortable moments and conflicts. Problems in communication may occur when two persons of different nationalities use a lingua franca in order to communicate. Some important factors which contribute to such breakdowns in communication are silence, laughing, the act of demanding something or even overconfidence. When trying to convey a message in the most direct way possible the interlocutor may perceive it as a moment of rudeness and impoliteness. However, due to one’s personal style and way of using the language, due to one’s personality and anxiety, the message that the person wants to get across may be distorted and badly interpreted. Sometimes, because of cultural background differences, women may feel mistreated by males. But such misunderstandings do not affect only interpersonal relations. Besides the fact that they can make a person feel ashamed, angry isolated or intimidated, they may have a huge impact on the outcome of a business, of a political issue or even on the health of one person if taking into consideration the medical field.

Overlooking communication may have serious consequences on the way medical services are delivered. Prejudicial attitudes or religious and spiritual beliefs may have ethical implications for the health care providers. Let’s take for example the case of the elderly people who should spend the rest of their lives in nursing homes. If for the Americans this is a common practice and it is generally acceptable, for the Romanians it is regarded as a bad choice. The mentality of the people is that children must take care of their parents. Abortions and C-sections are also perceived differently from one country to another. If in some places they are regarded as immoral and even forbidden by law, in other parts of the world they are perfectly normal and accepted by the society. Therefore, health care and communication are deeply embedded in culture, as physicians, nurses and clinicians in general come from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Medical conditions like impotence, sexually transmitted infections, mental illness or AIDS represent taboo subjects for some nationalities and they may be difficult to approach. On the other hand, most of the medical practice and diagnosis relies to a great extent on the communication with the patient even though some people might think that medicine is only about physical check-ups and procedures. In order to examine a patient, any doctor must ask questions and explain the treatment that he or she has to apply. The medical jargon used by physicians also poses problems and raises lots of questions. Even the most educated patient may fail to understand the message conveyed. When discussing with a diagnosis or a treatment, the language used must be kept as simple as possible. Kathleen Kennedy, dean of the College of Pharmacy at Xavier University from New Orleans, considers that any medical issued that are discussed by a doctor and a patient should follow a certain communication pattern named LEARN. This is in fact an acronym that stands for: “Listen to the patient’s perception of the problem; Explain your point of view; Acknowledge and discuss the

differences and disparities in perceptions of the problem; Recommend treatment; Negotiate treatment.” [3] For example, if one does not understand the medical terminology used, serious medical mistakes may occur. And this fact can create problems not only in hospitals but also in pharmacies. Very often, people turn to children to help them understand a diagnosis or a prescription written in another language. In some countries, there are specific laws which stipulate that a hospitalized patient should be provided with all the necessary resources that would help him understand the physician’s message. Another difficult situation may arise when the patient hides certain symptoms or feelings out of religious or cultural reasons or even due to a lack of courage in expressing oneself in a foreign language. Family and social background have had a huge impact on the health care system. Culture is learned within the family and it guides one’s lifestyle.

Cultural diversity requires a special attention focused on the different ethnical groups with various needs. According to some studies carried out in the field, “Western industrialized societies such as the United States, see disease as a result of natural scientific phenomena, advocate medical treatments that combat microorganisms or use sophisticated technology to diagnose and treat disease. Other societies believe that illness is the result of supernatural phenomena and promote prayer or other spiritual interventions that counter the presumed disfavor of powerful forces. Cultural issues play a major role in patient compliance.” [4] In some cultures, the custom is to bring lots of presents, food and flowers to the hospitalized relatives or friends, thing which could be against the hospital policy. Thus, conflicts may arise between visitors and clinicians due to cultural habits. “Among Chinese patients, because the behavior of the individual reflects on the family, mental illness or any behavior that indicates lack of self-control may produce shame and guilt. As a result, Chinese patients may be reluctant to discuss symptoms of mental illness or depression. Some sub-populations of cultures, such as those from India and Pakistan, are reluctant to accept a diagnosis of severe emotional illness or mental retardation because it severely reduces the chances of other members of the family getting married. In Vietnamese culture, mystical beliefs explain physical and mental illness. Health is viewed as the result of a harmonious balance between the poles of hot and cold that govern bodily functions. Vietnamese don’t readily accept Western mental health counseling and interventions, particularly when self-disclosure is expected.” [5]

Therefore, each ethnic group brings a unique and personal perspective to the health care system and despite the expectations that all patients are the same, that they all comply with the same “regulations”, along the years, globalization has brought major changes over all fields of life. Most often the course of an illness is affected by cultural differences, by cultural diversity or by cultural awareness. The first step in learning how to deal with such issues is to understand the traditions of the patients; to formulate simple questions and answers; to focus on non-verbal communication and to pay close attention to every gesture; to have an objective attitude towards the patient’s beliefs. Sometimes, people turn to spirituality as a way of treatment. Health care professionals, whose entire career is based on research and scientific evidence and results are reluctant in what concerns such beliefs and they tend to approach these patients with a certain dose of irony, which inevitably leads to mistrust. Communication barriers emerge instantly and instead of helping the individual the doctor prevents or halts the healing process. When dealing with people belonging to different religions physicians must gather some information related to their practices and habits in order to find a proper cure. They should not only take a medical history but also a religious history of the patient.

### **Food and culture**

If we consider the food culture we will notice that it has a huge impact on the population’s health. In some countries there is this general habit of eating soup when a person is ill or drinking milk when the individual is stressed and agitated. The fast food society has been, to a great extent shaped by the wide spread of McDonald’s or KFC restaurants. According to some surveys carried out in the United States of America, more than half of the overweight population puts the blame on fast food. And having some extra kilograms is not a sign of wealth as it used to be in the past, but a clear indication of a medical problem. The hamburgers and cheeseburgers and other similar such

products increase the cholesterol levels, the body fat, as well as the risk of heart attack. People often feel depressed, they lack energy and some of them even become addicted. Why is this food so unhealthy? First of all, it contains too much animal fat and sugar. Secondly, the society we live in, the constant pursuit of money, the desire to do as many things as possible in the shortest time are all factors that give the individual no other option but to eat something quickly, on the go. The fast food culture has become a wide spread phenomenon with the highest impact on the young population. Even though there are rules and regulations that state clearly what children should eat, or what kind of food the restaurants and canteens for pupils and students should sell, they are often disregarded and ignored. Due to the fact that parents have to work a lot to provide a good living for the family, they do not have time to cook. Children speculate such moments and consider that eating at McDonald's for example is the easy way out; and moreover it is fashionable too! After all, it is all connected to our background, to the way we were brought up and educated. There are still older people who, totally reject and oppose the idea of eating in fast foods because their parents did not expose them to such practices. Unfortunately, we live in a society where it is more important to work efficiently, long hours, instead of taking care of our physical and spiritual health. When travelling abroad people feel safer if they eat in McDonalds or KFC for example, out of a simple reason: they also have such a restaurant in their home town and they know the taste. And this attitude most often ruins the interaction one has with the new culture and the impact is somehow distorted. Food is part of a country's culture and a very important factor to take into account when travelling abroad. It may open new horizons and bring new experiences. The whole fast food culture is part of the globalization process of the development of state-of-the-art technologies. However, their success is due, to a great extent, to the outstanding ability of promoting their products. The advertising campaigns, the strategies they use, make them very good communicators.

To conclude, communication issues arise in all fields of life. Intercultural interaction has had a significant role in the past decades, as the population has become more culturally diverse. If considering the health care system, the efficiency of the treatment or even the life of a person may rely and depend on the physician-patient communication. There are many cultural barriers and taboos which might prevent the individual from talking honestly to the doctor. But a good physician will always be a good communicator as well: he will ask such questions as to determine the patient to open up and to help him put a correct diagnosis.

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