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Ethical Issues: Patient-Centered Communication

A newly released consensus report by the American Medical Association's Ethical Force Program¹ "Improving Communication—Improving Care" helps health care executives prioritize effective, patient-centered communication and create environments where staff members and patient populations from diverse backgrounds can communicate more effectively.

An increasing volume of complex information is being exchanged every day within and between health care systems and health care executives must think about the ways communication happens within and outside their organizations and who the audiences are for both one-on-one conversations and written information.

The E Force Communication Report² approaches communication as a quality improvement project and provides guidance in the areas of (1) Understanding the organization's commitment, (2) Collecting information, (3) Engaging communities, (4) Developing the workforce, (5) Engaging patients—based on (5a) Socio-cultural context, (5b) Language, and (5c) Health literacy—and (6) Evaluating performance. It also includes specific recommendations that organizations can consider when seeking improvement in each of these areas. By thinking about communication as a quality improvement project, it is possible for organizations to make and evaluate incremental change. These changes, over time, can subsequently lead to better communication and higher quality health care.

The report focuses on patient populations that have an especially high risk of facing communication gaps in health care. This includes populations whose members have limited or no English proficiency, cultures that are not well known by the organization's personnel or those who have limited health literacy skills. More than 95 million people do not have the fundamental literacy skills in English to understand even the most basic written information, such as how often to take their medication.

Our nation's increasing diversity has made good communication a challenge for many health care organizations," said Mary Pittman, Dr.P.H., president of the Health Research and Educational Trust and member of the Ethical Force Program's Oversight Body. "Not only do health care workers need training on how to communicate more effectively with patients, but health care organizations also need to provide staff with the tools and resources necessary to overcome language and cultural barriers."

"Good communication leads to stronger relationships between patients and health care professionals and better patient understanding and involvement in their care," said AMA Trustee Ardis Hoven, M.D., also a member of the Ethical Force Program's

Oversight Body. “Patients who understand their treatment plans are more likely to follow their physician’s advice and to return for follow-up care. If organizations put greater emphasis on effective communication, health care quality and safety will improve.” The full report can be viewed at www.ethicalforce.org, or hard copies can be obtained through the MU Center for Health Ethics. Dr. David Fleming, as a member of the E Force Oversight Body, served on the Expert Advisory Panel for this report.

¹ www.ethicalforce.org

² <http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/category/16245.html>