

## Anatomy of a Good Physician

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In our complex era of healthcare, it is interesting to consider what defines a “good” doctor. As physicians, each of us has particular goals and priorities or a personal standard of excellence we strive to reach. But what are our patients looking for in a physician?

In a recently published study, Schattner et al<sup>1</sup> addressed this issue. In their investigation, they set out to define patient priorities regarding different physician’s attributes in 3 domains important in medical care: (1) patient autonomy, (2) professional expertise, and (3) humanism.

Patients who were hospitalized or attending clinics at a large teaching hospital were asked to select the 4 attributes that they considered most important out of 21 listed arbitrarily in a questionnaire. The questionnaire included 7 items from each of the 3 domains. Participating patients (n=445, mean age 57.5±16 years) chose the following as the most essential attributes: professional expertise (50%), physician’s patience and attentiveness (38% and 30%, respectively), and informing the patient, representing the patient’s interests, being truthful and respecting patient’s preferences (25%–36% each). Patient selections were not significantly influenced by different demographic or clinical backgrounds.<sup>1</sup>

Selections of attributes in the domain of patient autonomy were significantly more frequent. This was the preferred domain for 31% of patients and was rated as important as another domain for 16%. This was significantly more than for the domain of professional expertise ( $P=.008$ ) and much more than for the domain of humanism and support ( $P<.0005$ ). The authors concluded that the patients studied “want their physicians to be highly professional and expert clinicians and show humaneness and support, but their first priority is for the physician to respect their autonomy.”<sup>1</sup>

The authors remarked that they were unclear why patient autonomy featured so highly in their study but noted that “it is conceivable that the

growing emphasis in recent years on patient’s rights and patient’s autonomy, which is prominently reflected in the media and draws much public attention, affected patient’s preferences.”<sup>1</sup>

The study also indicates that most patients want to be informed about their health even if the news is bad and want to be involved with their care plans. To do that, patients must have clear information that takes into account their unique circumstances, and “there is no better source for that than the patient’s physician.”<sup>1</sup> Study results strongly suggest that patients expect their physicians to heed these needs and prefer physicians who are sensitive to the varied aspects of patient autonomy and patient rights.<sup>1</sup>

The studies of Thom et al<sup>2,3</sup> demonstrate that certain physician behaviors are important for patient trust. Discussing options with the patient and finding out preferences, essential components of patient autonomy, were prominent among these behaviors.<sup>2</sup> The authors also found that patient trust was significantly correlated with compliance and clinical improvement.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, no study is conclusive, and all patients have different needs. However, the aforementioned studies suggest evolving patient needs in a changing healthcare environment. They also give us something to consider as we strive to be the best physicians possible and provide the highest standard of care.

### REFERENCES

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