6 Things You Should NEVER Say to a Patient

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Let’s face it: Like everyone else, physicians don’t always say the right things. “Do you always weigh that much?” is an example that we heard about, um, somewhere. And when we polled for cringe-worthy comments, a few physicians teased, “Hunh, where’d my watch go?” and “Which leg are we operating on?” But there are less obvious and more insidious phrases that find their way into physician-patient interactions and eat away at patient confidence. Good patient care requires good communication as much as well-honed clinical skills. Here’s your guide to six common phrases physicians too often say to patients:

1. “This won’t hurt at all.” Some physicians overestimate their own deftness at performing procedures painlessly. The truth is, many procedures do hurt, at least a little, even when performed with skill, and patients would rather know that going in. Pediatricians, in particular, must be careful that patients don’t eventually take such assurances as a prelude to pain. Try, “This could be a little uncomfortable,” or “This will hurt some, but it’ll be over before you know it.”

2. “We’re just really busy.” A patient who had been waiting patiently is now getting frustrated as his scheduled appointment time comes and goes. It’s tempting to shoo away the complaint, but uttering these words can disparage the patient, who is probably also quite busy and perhaps missing work for this appointment. It may be time to rethink your scheduling, but for now, apologize and give your patient an estimate for when he will be seen.

3. “I understand how you feel.” Unless you’ve personally battled this particular debilitating disease or have undergone this less-than-pleasant treatment, you couldn’t possibly understand exactly how your patient is feeling. Of course you mean well, but you don’t want to insult your patient or belittle her experiences. Instead, try expressing empathy by saying, “I can only imagine how you feel.”

4. “We can’t find your chart.” It may seem harmless enough, and perhaps you are hoping to score points for an honest explanation for the delay, but surely no patient likes to hear this phrase, particularly if he’s laying on a gurney with an IV in his arm in the operating room. If you find yourself muttering these words often, you’re doing a disservice to your patients and your practice. Perhaps it’s finally time to transition to an EHR.

5. “I’m sure it’s nothing serious.” Are you? Consider how you will have to eat those words if your patient’s runny nose and headache turns out to be mild symptoms of a chronic or life-threatening disease. Though meant as words of assurance (and with the odds on your side), you just never know what the tests will reveal, and false promises are a death blow to patient trust. Instead, provide assurance through thorough exams and attentive listening to patient concerns.

6. “Oops.” This was the favorite among our informal mini-survey of physicians, but all jokes aside, if you make a mistake this is not the phrase you want to lead with when telling the patient. Transparency and admission of error are good rules of thumb, but hearing the doctor utter “Oops” or some similar term while on the exam table strikes fear into even the toughest patients. Try to avoid exclamations and tell the patient the truth in a way that exudes competence and professionalism.

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