

Clarifies and explores cues offered

Green – Encourages the patient and clarifies his/her presenting problem

Red – Does not clarify in an attempt to fully understand the patient's problem(s)

Green – Fluently and sensitively explores cues at an appropriate time in the consultation

Red – Ignores cues offered and/or returns to a cue at an inappropriate time that impairs further exploration

About this skill

Clarifying is the process whereby doctors become clear about the patient's presenting problem, concerns and expectations. The process involves the identification of patient statements that are confused, vague, incomplete or ambiguous and then attempting to resolve the ambiguity or vagueness. This can be done by using:

- Repetition of the previous question with a different emphasis
- Further open questions
- A closed question to clarify an ambiguous or confusing point
- A mini- summary to try and structure a complex history (sometimes termed 'chunking and checking')
- A check that the patient's story has been understood completely

Note that the above consultation skills are not compulsory - some patients are very clear about their symptoms and concerns - but with some consultations these sorts of skills can rescue a muddled consultation.

Exploring cues offered is connected to clarifying, as these cues offer an insight into the patient's ICE and also may form part of the diagnostic process.

Examples of phrases that facilitate the exploration of cues are:

- You sound low, what's been happening? How is your mood?
- You mentioned...you were worried, you thought it was cancer...
- That sounds really tough, can you talk to me more about this?
- I'm really sorry to hear that, how do you feel about this?
- You mentioned that you had used some medication, how did that go?

Audio consultations

Clarifying patient statements during audio consultations will follow the same pattern as face-to-face as long as the doctor listens carefully and there are no problems with sound quality.

Without visual cues however, picking up on cues and then exploring them is more challenging on the telephone. In addition, a doctor does not have the immediate feedback of visual cues in response to their questioning. A patient could be looking annoyed and averting eye contact on the end of the telephone and the doctor will be unaware. Doctors need to be very careful therefore, to pick up on all verbal cues offered and *specifically explore*, checking that they uncover the patient's agenda and do not simply follow their own fixed agenda.

Educational Activities

Clarifying

Activity 1: Watch a video/listen to one of your consultations, concentrating on what the patient says, and see whether there is any:

- Confusion
- Vagueness
- Incompleteness
- Ambiguity

Activity 2: For each example of the above, ask yourself how you responded to this lack of clarity. Did you let it go by, or did you make an attempt to clarify?

Activity 3: Now look at the situations where you did attempt to achieve clarification - in each situation, did your attempt at clarification work - in other words are you clearer about what the patient meant after the clarification compared to before your clarification?

Activity 4: If you feel you are not effective at identification or dealing with a lack of clarity, watch your trainer consult. What strategies does he/she use to achieve clarity? Write them down and begin to use them in your next surgery.

Activity 5: Repeat the analysis of your video/audio after you have been practicing this approach. Do you think you are becoming more successful at identifying and dealing with lack of clarity?

Exploring Cues

Activity 1: Watch a series of your videos/listen to some audio consultations with your trainer - write down all the possible cues that occur and compare your list with your trainer. Remember to do some videos focusing the camera on the patient and note non-verbal cues in addition to verbal cues. Cues on audio consultations may be expressed in words or through tone or silences/the way a patient responds to the doctor.

Activity 2: For each of these cues that has been identified, discuss with your trainer the possible ways to respond to the patient about the cue and whether it is appropriate to explore it at the time or signpost to return later. Depending on the circumstances you may wish to:

- Explore the cue ("What did you mean by")
- Link the cue to other information the patient has given you ("You said something similar when we were talking about your worries.")

Activity 3: Repeat the analysis of your video/audio consultations after you have been practicing this approach. Do you think you are becoming more successful at exploring cues, including at the appropriate and most effective time in the consultation?

Audio consultations

All of the above activities can be also applied to audio consultations.

It may also be useful to reflect with your trainer- Do you think that there more ambiguity in audio consultations as compared to face-to-face consultations? If yes, why do you feel this is so? Is it related to the lack of visual interaction?

Related tasks

Practicing and developing the skill of '*Clarifies and explores cues offered*' will allow you to achieve the following tasks more effectively:

- Opens consultation and explores problem
- Discovers patient's psycho-social context
- Identifies cues
- Discovers patient's ICE

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