

Structures consultation

Green – There is a discernible overall structure and plan within the consultation

Red – There is little or no overall structure or plan within the consultation

Green – There is a logical progression through the various tasks of the consultation

Red – There is little or no progression through the tasks, with omission, repetition and/or an unusual order of tasks.

Green – There is a clear agenda for the consultation either explicit or implicit

Red – There is no clear agenda for the consultation

Green – Transitions within the consultation are understandable or are clearly signposted

Red – Transitions within the consultation appear unexpectedly and may not be understandable

Green – Summaries are offered if needed, at appropriate points in the consultation

Red – Summaries are absent, or unrelated to the degree of complexity of the consultation

About this global skill

A structured consultation is helpful for both doctor and patient. For the doctor, it provides confidence that the consultation has been complete, comprehensive and thorough. For the patient, it is reassuring that the consultation does not throw up surprises or unexpected changes in direction.

To achieve a structured consultation, the doctor needs to have an overall plan in his or her head. However, this should not be followed in a rigid way - always make time in your consultation to take the consultation in a direction dictated by the patient. (Refer to the Toolkit section '*Remains responsive to the patient*')

There are several techniques to produce structure in the consultation. These include laying out the plan of the consultation. Summaries can be a useful strategy, particularly when the history or plan has been complex. Signposting (explaining what is coming next in the consultation or explaining the reason for a particular line of questioning) is helpful if there is going to be a sudden change of direction, or a move into emotionally sensitive or unexpected areas.

Audio consultations

Structure within the consultation is equally important during audio consultations. Because you are not sitting alongside the patient, but instead relying purely on verbal exchange of information, there is a greater possibility for confusion and lack of structure within the consultation. It is therefore important to signpost regularly within an audio consultation and offer short summaries when there is any possibility of lack of clarity.

Educational activities

Activity 1: Review a series of your consultations with your trainer and *write down* the areas that you feel may be contributing to poor structure. In particular, consider:

- Is there a logical progression of tasks through the consultation? (see Toolkit section 'Progresses through tasks' for more information)
- Are any helpful summaries offered at appropriate times in the consultation? (typically, after a period during which there has been an exchange of complex information)
- Is there evidence of 'signposting' when there is a sudden change of direction, or where there are questions that are personal or emotionally sensitive

Discuss this assessment with your trainer or with an experienced colleague. Pay particular attention to situations where your assessment differs from that of your colleague.

Activity 2: Now try to eliminate these causes of lack of structure - using the information and in other areas of this Toolkit. You might want to do this one problem at a time and get one part of the consultation well-structured before you apply this to the whole consultation. When you feel you are making progress, the consultation to your trainer or colleague. Ask the questions - "Is this consultation more structured than before?" and "What areas do I need to work on?"

Audio consultations

Do you think your audio consultations are as structured as your face-to-face consultations? If not, why is there a difference?

Review a series of audio consultations and try to identify why the consultation becomes unstructured. As for the face-to-face consultations, ask is this due to - lack of logical progression - absent or inappropriate summaries - absence of signposting?

Reflective exercises

Exercise 1: Do you agree that a structured consultation is important? What is the effect on patient care of an unstructured consultation? Can you think of any other methods to improve the structure in a consultation?

Related tasks

Practicing and developing the skill of '*Structures consultation*' will allow you to achieve the following tasks more effectively:

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

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