

Supports in decision making

Green – Demonstrates support of patient through decision making, with clear explanation of likely impact on the patient's welfare of the various options

Red – Does not support patient, who may be asked to choose from a number of confusing or irrelevant options

About this skill

Sharing management options and supporting the patient in making a decision are closely related and overlapping skills. Whereas sharing is mainly concerned with information giving and discussion, supporting is the process where the doctor helps the patient settle on a particular management plan. Many trainees fail to offer real support to the patient in their decision making - they offer a number of options to patient and say something like: "*Which one do you want to choose?*" This is unhelpful for the patient - they are left having to make a difficult choice on their own when what they need is *support* from the doctor.

Support in decision making builds on the sharing process described in '*Shares and uses ICE in plan*' and involves the following steps:

- Being alert to verbal and non-verbal cues expressed by patients about particular management options
- Exploring how particular management options might affect the patient's day to day life
- If appropriate, checking that the patient understands what is involved in the various management options
- Answering and clarifying any patient questions
- Being aware when the patient has reached a decision about management, and summarising this decision
- Offering further support should the patient's need this

Checking understanding

Checking the patient's understanding of both the management options and the final management decision can be an important part of both sharing and supporting and can make the consultation more effective. But it can be very clunky, can antagonise the patient, and can waste valuable time.

So be selective in how you use this in a GP consultation. It is particularly useful in the following situations:

- When the consultation options are complex
- When there is evidence that the patient is struggling to understand the management options
- When the patient has a learning disability

Audio consultations

Decisions within an audio consultation are different to decisions within a face-to-face consultation. Often the decision relates to whether or not the patient should be seen in the surgery or at home, or whether advice over the phone will suffice. In addition, there is often less information from verbal and non-verbal cues to support the decision. So, there is a greater need to support the patient in the decision, and a greater need to check the patient's understanding.

Educational Activities

Activity 1: Watch a series of videos concentrating just on the part of the consultation where decisions are made. For each 'decision' ask yourself:

- Does the patient have sufficient information to make a decision?
- Do you give the patient opportunity to ask questions and clarify what each option involves?
- Is there evidence that the patient's previously expressed views and values are brought into the decision-making process?
- Does the patient seem involved in the decision-making process?
- Do you feel that the patient was supported in the decision-making process?

Activity 2: Watch your trainer helping their patients make decisions. Are there are differences between the approach they use and the approach you use. Reflect on these differences.

Activity 3: You can practice this process with friends or family. Simply choose a condition for which there are several treatment options. Explain to the 'patient' what treatment options are available and try to help them make a decision about which treatment to choose. Ask them if they felt involved and supported during the process?

Audio consultations

Review a series of your audio consultations. What sorts of decisions are you making with the patient? For each decision you hear on the audio:

- Is the patient involved in the decision?
- What information from earlier in the consultation have you used to support the patient in decision making?
- Are there any clues from the patient response to tell you whether the patient is happy with the decision made?

Reflective Exercises

Exercise 1: Think and reflect about what sort of phrases might indicate to the patient that the doctor is supporting them. Examples might include: "As your doctor, I am wondering if some time off work might help....?" Or..."I can understand that the option of surgery is not feasible at the moment". Develop a range of other phrases that suit your conversational style, and then practice them with patients.

Related tasks

Practicing and developing the skill of '*Supports in decision making*' will allow you to achieve the following tasks more effectively:

- Discovers patient's psycho-social context
- Identifies cues
- Discovers patient's ICE
- Offers a safe patient centred management plan
- Provides follow up/safety net

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