INTERACTIVE PATIENT COUNSELING POINTERS

Consultation Goals

Traditionally, the emphasis of the medication consultation has been on providing information to the patient in which the pharmacist is the teacher and the patient is the passive learner. In contrast, the goal of the interactive process is to verify that the patient understands how to take the medication properly, to tease out how the patient may be using current medications, and elicit an accurate past medical history or use of herbal supplements and over-the-counter medications. In this interactive approach, the pharmacist uses directed, open ended questions to initiate dialogue to ascertain the patient’s comprehension. The pharmacist fills in gaps of knowledge, when needed, and concludes the consultation with a brief summary by the patient (NOT the pharmacist).

This approach offers many advantages. Since the patient is more actively involved in the education process, retention of key information is improved. Because the pharmacist only fills in the gaps, the consultation is shorter and the patient doesn’t waste time listening to material that he or she already knows. Remember that you are a detective and want the patient to elucidate their needs and medication and past medical history. In addition, the process allows the pharmacist to personalize each encounter increasing the satisfaction of both pharmacist and patient. Most importantly, at the end of the interactive consultation, both parties are confident that the patient has enough understanding.

Parts of the Interactive Consultation

Patient counseling begins at the moment of the introduction. Establish rapport by introducing yourself to the patient, verifying the patient’s identity and stating the purpose of the consultation. A handshake may be appropriate although the verbal counseling process does not require touch. After the introduction the consultation process continues with specific questions to verify the patients understanding of medication usage. Following the questions is final verification of the medication review.

Essential Questions

Three essential questions form the foundation for the medication consultation. Each of these questions probes the patient’s knowledge of a specific area of comprehension needed.

1) “What did your doctor tell you the medication is for?” This question reviews the purpose of the medication.

2) “How did your doctor tell you to take the medication?” This question covers all aspects of dosage and administration.

3) “What did your doctor tell you to expect from the medication?” This final question discusses expected outcomes, potential side effects, and appropriate actions that should be taken if unexpected outcomes occur.
If the patient does not know the answer to any of these questions, the pharmacist should fill in the gaps with specific information before moving on to the next essential question. This alternating question and answer format keeps the patient actively involved in the consultation process, which for the adult learner is crucial to knowledge retention and recall. Inappropriate responses should alert the pharmacist to possible problems with comprehension due to hearing, vision, or language problems.

You can also expand on these with some follow up / probing questions.

✔ What did your doctor tell you the medication is for?
  - What problem or symptom is it supposed to help?
  - What is it supposed to do?

✔ How did your doctor tell you to take the medication?
  - How often did your doctor say to take it?
  - How much are you supposed to take?
  - How long are you to continue taking it?
  - What did your doctor say to do when you miss a dose?
  - How should you store this medication?
  - What does 3 times a day mean to you?

✔ What did your doctor tell you to expect?
  - What good effects are you supposed to expect?
  - How will you know if the medication is working?
  - What bad effects did your doctor tell you to watch for?
  - What should you do if a bad reaction occurs?
  - What precautions are you to take while on this medication?
  - How will you know if it is not working?
  - What are you to do if the medication doesn’t work?

Asking questions of the same sort together provides structure for a thorough inquiry. Specific points of information can be offered at any time throughout the consultation. For example, while asking how to take the medication, information about administration should be provided. Having the patient demonstrate the use of inhalers or injectables shows you whether the patient really does understand the verbal instructions.

**Final Verification**

The last and most important step in this interactive approach is final verification—asking the patient to recall for you how the medication is to be taken. Think of the final verification as asking the patient to “play back” everything he or she has learned in order to check that the information is complete and accurate. Listen to the patient’s response, correct any misinformation, reemphasize important points and add any missing information. Then ask the patient if he or she has any additional questions. Close the consultation with an offer to help when questions arise.