

How nurses nurture their communication skills.

Presenting With Care

Last year, I was hired to teach a public speaking course at a hospital – a course targeted to nurses. The nurses in the class wanted better skills and techniques for giving presentations. Most of all, they wanted strategies for overcoming fear and nervousness when speaking to groups large and small.

“The toughest groups to talk to are the doctors,” said Nancy, a nurse at Mid Coast Hospital in Brunswick, Maine, where the class was taught. (The nurses’ names were changed for the purpose of this article so they could speak candidly about their concerns.) She was one of eight in the class, including an operating room nurse, the hospital’s director of nursing education, and a nurse who counsels patients before and after surgeries. Nancy and the others agree that doctors can be impatient and intimidating at times.

Dr. Richard F. Kammerman, Sr., a member of a Toastmasters club for doctors and others in the medical profession, says it’s vital that nurses and doctors communicate effectively. A retired family physician in Santa Ana, California, Kammerman is a member of the Orange County Medical Association Toastmasters club. He says doctors depend on nurses to train patients on various aspects of their care, so it’s critical they both are on the same page regarding instructions given to patients before they’re released from the

hospital – instructions about medicine, diet, exercise, how to administer medicines to themselves, etc.

What’s more, some nurses specialize in areas of knowledge that doctors need to better understand in order to prescribe care for specific patients. “Doctors may need specific education [from nurses] on such subjects as availability of, and how to access, hospice services, and home-care assessments and services, including the patient’s capability of self care and the availability of ancillary-care needs,” says Kammerman, now a professor in the department of family medicine at the University of California, Irvine.

“The physician should be wise enough to take the nurse’s assessments seriously,” says Kammerman. Consider special-needs individuals who cannot speak for themselves. He notes that it is the doctor’s responsibility to ensure the patient and caregivers understand the patient’s condition and the recommended treatment, but it is the nurse who usually sees that instructions are carried out.

As a result, it is oftentimes the nurses who find means of improving treatments ordered. If nurses describe a new piece of equipment or other technological advances that are beneficial to patients, doctors are typically attentive and appreciative, as this information impacts their patient’s care, says Dr. Luis

Kobashi, a urologist and fellow member of the Orange County Medical Association Toastmasters.

Helping with Presentations

While nurses must give many presentations to physicians, they more often give such speeches to other nurses and student nurses. In the Mid Coast Hospital class – which ran for two consecutive evenings last May – I offered a variety of strategies and tips for delivering these types of presentations. I used materials from several sources and selected a few physical exercises designed to funnel tension out of the body before a presentation. We began the class both nights by performing these exercises. We would stand loosely and shake our arms overhead, wriggle our hands, lift and shake the alternate legs and feet, take a few deep breaths and perform slow-paced neck and head rolls. These exercises serve to “bleed off” some of the nervous energy before a presentation so that shakiness is minimized.

In general, audiences most often complain about speakers who don’t talk loudly enough, or talk too quickly. When people are nervous about speaking before a group, they often speed through the material without pauses. Medical audiences in particular need frequent pauses, especially when trying to absorb new material. They also need the pauses so that



words are audible as distinct units and not a continuum of noise. Slow, audible and distinct: This is the foundation for any effective presentation or speech, but it is critical when medical professionals speak.

Much of the tension that comes from anticipating any kind of presentation can be alleviated by visiting the venue where the talk will be given, standing at the lectern and rehearsing the presentation. (Including learning how to work with a microphone and/or pointer for a PowerPoint presentation.)

This is particularly true for those speaking in a medical setting. Nurses might give instruction to students while assisting in a surgical suite, in which case they should know where to stand and what their duties are for a specific operation and where their students will stand. That way, they'll know how best to present their material around the actual surgery. The nurse giving the talk goes in knowing her space

and equipment, and can focus on delivering the material itself.

Whether the nurse's presentation is to fellow nurses, students or a group of doctors, the better her technique, the more an audience will absorb. The important thing in any lecture is to present ideas clearly and stay on point, says Kobashi.

"In other words, don't explain at length principles of wound care and handling, with which all surgeons are already familiar," he says. Know the audience and their basic level of knowledge before planning the specifics of the presentation.

The opening of a speech for doctors or nurses might not be as critical as one for, say, business executives paying for a high-powered motivational speaker. However, openings are still important. The Mid Coast nurses believed that opening with an interesting statistic or anecdote was good to garner audience attention. Statistics and anecdotes humanize material and are also

effective to convey significant content and make it memorable.

"It is hard to be energetic while giving talks on medical topics," said Mary, a nurse who finds enthusiasm for her presentations by remembering that lives can depend on her effectiveness in conveying information related to patient care.

Practice makes perfect, and that includes timing a presentation before giving it, as all Toastmasters know. Prepare the material, "visit" the venue if possible, know who your audience is, and the rest will follow. The first presentation is the hardest, as the Mid Coast nurses admitted, but once a speaker has that first delivery under her belt it gets easier, and the presentations get better and better. ■

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