



Functional health illiteracy: What patients don't know can hurt them

While the sentiment that “what I don’t know can’t hurt me” was clearly never true in the area of health, the increasing complexity of medicine has made what your patient doesn’t know ever more dangerous.

In this issue of the *Journal* (page 415), Dr. Mark Williams calls our attention to the shocking ineffectiveness of our communication of basic information to our patients about their diseases and treatments. Patients often walk out of our offices newly burdened with diagnoses they don’t understand, armed with powerful and dangerous drugs, and with precious little to help them in case something goes wrong.

Certain aspects of modern medical practice don’t help, either. As we are continuously on the receiving end of pressure to see more patients in shorter periods of time, this already inadequate communication is strained even further.

As things stand now, if our patients don’t have the capability of tracking down some information on their own, they can get themselves into serious trouble before we or they can recognize it. Some particularly self-reliant and competent patients make good use of the Internet and other sources for this purpose, and they educate themselves about their conditions and treatments. Most do not, however, and they are at great risk, as Dr. Williams points out.

At least in the case of chronic diseases, it may be time to recognize that the traditional one-on-one method by which a physician teaches a patient about the disease has become obsolete. While face-to-face time with the physician is certainly necessary, it may be beneficial to supplement this with more formal classroom teaching by professional educators as part of a team approach to patient care. Patient education has become a discipline in itself, with its own scientific basis, and physicians need to take better advantage of it.

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