

Doctor - Patient Difficulties Often Result Of Improper Communication

By Dick Broom
CHAPEL HILL — In all their years of training, most doctors are never taught how to use an instrument they rely on in diagnosing and treating 15-20 per cent of their patients' primary medical problems.

Of course, they already know how to use the telephone.

But they may not be skilled at using it as a medical tool, says Dr. Peter Curtis, assistant professor of family medicine in the School of Medicine at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"About 75 per cent of problems presented in a primary care setting can be handled on the phone," Curtis says. "Yet, most physicians learn to deal with the phone only as a tool of organization and administration."

"Because they don't receive any formal training in telephone medicine, they often have trouble dealing with patients' problems on the phone."

For the past three years Curtis has been studying ways to improve the

telephone skills of primary care physicians and nurses. He recently received a \$35,000 grant from the National Fund for Medical Education to help support an ongoing research and training program in the Family Practice Center at the N. C. Memorial Hospital.

The center's research unit keeps a record of all physician-patient telephone contacts—more than 6,000 in the past three years.

"This information we've collected and are using in our educational program may help doctors adjust their skills and the way they handle phone calls," Curtis says. "In our own program, we monitor and analyze residents' responses in various telephone situations. This is then fed back to them as part of their training."

The research unit's records show that approximately 50 per cent of all calls to the Family Practice Center during the daytime and 80 per cent of after-hours calls deal with medical or psycho-social problems rather than administrative procedures such as making appointments.

Although most calls concern minor problems such as colds and headaches, many are prompted by more serious medical conditions including fractures, lacerations and severe chest pains.

One of the most important skills of telephone medicine, Curtis says, is the ability to distinguish callers who can be treated over the phone from those who must be treated in person.

"If you get everybody who calls to come in, that's poor use of the health care system. A lot of people will be seen who don't really need to be seen."

Curtis says that many people who call physicians, especially after hours, are primarily seeking reassurance.

"A lot of people call because they are anxious or afraid of what a symptom might mean," he explains. "If a relative has just died of a heart attack, and they begin to have chest pains, they want somebody to tell them not to worry."

Often patients call with what Curtis refers to as a hidden agenda. They have a specific concern but may be afraid or embarrassed to talk about it directly. For example, a patient may complain of a headache, when his real concern is the

possibility of a brain tumor. The problem, Curtis says, is that physicians sometimes don't perceive the underlying reason for the call.

"Usually within the first minute of the call, the doctor has made up his mind what the problem is and his mind snaps shut. He doesn't really listen any more, but spend the rest of the time instructing the patient based on that initial assessment."

"Often, the patient's anxieties haven't been relieved, because the doctor never gave him an opportunity to bring out the real problem."

A patient survey taken by the family practice research unit revealed a significant degree of misunderstanding about the motivation for patients' calls. Interviews

with patients and physicians after the calls revealed miscommunication in 30 per cent of the calls prompted by anxiety.

Curtis says physicians should learn to ask the kinds of questions that bring out a patient's hidden agenda:

"Is there anything else you're worried about?"
 "Have I answered all your questions?"

"Do you know someone who's had a problem like yours recently?"

Taking complete medical histories and finding out what medications the patient is taking are other skills physicians routinely use in face-to-face encounters but sometimes let slip in telephone conversations, Curtis says.

Besides sharpening physicians' communications skills, Curtis says telephone medical training should aim to reduce some of the anger and frustration that calls from patients sometimes arouse.

"As part of our program, we also try to stress the importance of being sensitive to psycho-social problems and family dynamics."

Physicians are understandably less patient with people who call after hours, especially if the problem is not serious. But studies also have found that physicians tend to show anger toward certain types of patients and those with certain diseases. Psycho-social problems are perceived as especially bothersome, Curtis says.

"If a doctor is called at 3 A.M., he is likely to be much more sympathetic if the patient is bleeding than if there's been a big family argument and the patient has been thrown out of the

house or has made a suicide attempt."

Physicians also show more frustration when dealing with alcoholism and gynecological problems. He says that, in general, women and elderly people are not treated with as much sensitivity as other patients.

Curtis emphasizes that there may be many acceptable ways—not necessarily one best way—to handle a patient's call. But he says there are certain fundamental telephone medicine skills that physicians ought to be aware of and practice.

DOT Holds Meeting

JACKSONVILLE — The N. C. Board of Transportation in its monthly meeting today approved 42 contracts totaling more than \$31.6-million for improvements to highways across the state.

Five of those contracts were for major interstate projects, which are being advanced nearly four months ahead of schedule because of additional federal funding announced recently. They include

safety improvements on a portion of I-40 in Burke County, paving and signing on two portions of I-95 (Fayetteville Bypass) in Cumberland County, and safety improvements on two portions of I-85 in Guilford, Rowan and Davidson counties.

In addition to the interstate projects, there were seven contracts awarded for pavement markings at railroad crossings and school zones state-wide and 19 contracts for paving and resurfacing roads in

and western sections of North Carolina. A contract bid on one project was rejected by the board because it was in excess of staff engineering estimates. The project — widening of US-70 business in Durham County — will be readvertised at a later date.

Secretary of Transportation Tom Bradshaw noted, "During this current fiscal year (beginning in July 1979) the transportation board has awarded \$50.4-million for highway construction and improvements. Such action exemplifies the board's commitment to carry out Governor Jim Hunt's policy on balanced growth and economic development through a comprehensive transportation system."

The board also took action on requests for funding of primary, secondary and urban road projects as well as bridge replacement projects.

Social Security News Update

By Lee Wallis
MORE THAN JUST A RETIREMENT CHECK:

Did you know that under certain circumstances a child may qualify for a Social Security check based on a grandparent's work under Social Security?

Or, that a divorced woman whose ex-husband has died may qualify for a Social Security check based on his record?

Or, that a dependent parent may qualify for Social Security based on a deceased son's or daughter's work under Social Security?

If you don't know about these Social Security benefits, you may have thought of Social Security simply as a program that pays retirement benefits to older people.

Social Security also pays

Booklet Published

A booklet explaining some of the important aspects of pension plans has been published by the Department of Labor.

"Know Your Pension Plan", a 16-page booklet, includes checklists which, when filled in by an employee, provides a handy outline of his or her plan's provisions. The booklet also discusses some of the protections afforded to plan participants and their beneficiaries under the Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA).

Copies of "Know Your Pension Plan" are available free of charge from:

Labor-Management Services Administration
 Administration
 U. S. Department of Labor
 Atlanta Area Office
 Suite 540,
 1365 Peachtree St., N.E.
 Atlanta, Ga. 30309
 Telephone: 404-881-4090

benefits to disabled workers and the dependents of retired, deceased, or disabled workers.

The fact is that more than a third of the 14,000 people in the Albemarle area currently receiving Social Security benefits are the dependents of retired, deceased, or disabled workers.

Benefits for dependents have been payable since Social Security benefits were first paid in 1940.

They are designed to help prevent poverty and economic dependency within society by enabling a worker to provide for the day when he can no longer support those depending on his earnings.

What you don't know



Experts on human behavior tell us that motorists and bicyclists who curb their first impulse to show annoyance or aggression on the road are more likely to find it progressively easier to share the road.

about Social Security can hurt you. An application for benefits is necessary before benefits can be paid.

People who are unaware of what Social Security benefits are payable risk the loss of benefits.

At the very least they lose the opportunity to use the information in their family financial planning.

Preparedness Is Stressed

Many coastal newcomers have never felt the full fury of a hurricane, but longtime residents can remember the wreckage left behind by Hurricane Hazel and others.

To remind citizens of the dangers and what to do to protect their lives and their property when storms approach, a week-long series of films, speakers and exhibits will be presented August 19-25 at the state's three Marine Resources Centers at Roanoke Island near Manteo, Bogue Banks near Atlantic Beach and Fort Fisher near Kure

Beach. More information about the many kinds of Social Security benefits is given in the pamphlet, "Your Social Security", which is available by telephoning any Social Security office. The Elizabeth City Social Security office is located at 111 Jordan Plaza next to Southgate Mall (phone 338-2161) and is open 9:00 to 4:30 weekdays.

Some of the topics to be covered include preparation for a hurricane, how a hurricane forms, coastal insurance needs, evacuation plans and radio communications.

Admission is free and all sessions are open to the public.

The centers are public education facilities administered by the Office of Marine Affairs of the N. C. Department of Administration. They are cosponsoring the event in cooperation with the University of North Carolina Sea Grant College Program and the State Division of Civil Preparedness as a community service.

Daniels Is Reappointed

CHARLESTON, S. C. — State Sen. Melvin R. Daniels, Jr., of Elizabeth City, N. C., has been appointed to a three-year term on the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council which is headquartered in Charleston, S. C.

He replaces Norman Angel of New Bern. The appointment was effective August 11, according to Richard A. Frank, Administrator of NOAA, acting on behalf of the Secretary of Commerce.

Sen. Daniels brings a thorough knowledge of North Carolina fisheries to the council from the standpoint of both commercial

and recreational fishing, as well as awareness of environmental issues affecting the coastal areas. He played an active role in the development of the Wanchese Harbor Seafood Development Project and has introduced legislation for the benefit of the fishing community of North Carolina.

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council is one of eight created by the Fishery Conservation and Management Act of 1976 which extended U. S. fisheries jurisdiction out to 200 miles. The council is responsible for preparing Fishery Management Plans for species within the 200 mile limit of the waters of N. C.; S. C.; Ga. and the east coast of Florida.

"The hardest job of all is trying to look busy when you're not," William Feather

Wildlife Refuge To Open

Pungo National Wildlife Refuge will be open to archery deer hunting this year from September 17 through October 3. Bow hunting permits are not required.

Regulations must be obtained from the Refuge office in the Strader Building in Plymouth or at the Refuge sub-headquarters or by writing the Refuge at P. O. Box 267, Plymouth, N. C. 27962.

Shotgun deer hunting on the refuge will be on October 10, 11, 12, 17, 18, 19, 25 and 26. One day permits will be limited to one per person. Two hundred (200) permits

per day will be issued as a result of a public drawing to be held on September 5 at 10 A.M. in the Refuge office in the Strader Building.

Applications for a shotgun deer permit may be in the form of a letter to the Refuge Manager at the above address. Print or type your full name, address, North Carolina hunting license number, first through eighth choice of hunting dates and sign the application. Up to five people may apply together as a party by enclosing all applications in one envelope marked "Party Hunt". Each applicant must include a stamped, self-addressed envelope for delivery of the permit or rejection notice. Applications must be received at the Refuge Office or post office box by September 3. Each application will be assigned a number and that number will be put in a box and randomly drawn. Duplicate or fraudulent applications will cause the applicant to be disqualified for the drawing.

When you want to save energy... The phone is the answer.



Peter Graves for Norfolk Carolina Telephone

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to the post office. Asking directions over the phone can save a lot of wasted driving. There are many energy "shortcuts" your telephone can provide you, so use it often.

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