

Personal Connections- what drives best healthcare? Having compassion and a human aspect to healthcare

According to a survey conducted by The Orsini Way, a physician communications training company, 71% of respondents said they've experienced a lack of compassion when speaking with a physician, and 73% said they always feel rushed by their doctor.¹

For one town in Sweden, a 2007 bus crash illustrated this finding. Researchers aiming to study what survivors of a tragedy remember after the fact found that two common themes in what the survivors remember were the physical pain experienced in the crash, and the lack of compassion shown by the caregivers at the hospital.² Researchers were shocked to find this commonality from multiple different survivors who had no communication with each other.

A lack of compassion in a medical setting can be caused by many things; increasing demands of physicians, time restraints, and a lack of understanding of the importance of and methods to show compassion. Because of this, many physicians and providers lack the personal connection with their patients that is needed to fully drive better health outcomes.

Why is this important/ why does it drive better outcomes?

Not only is compassion, or the lack thereof, memorable for patients, but it can also have an impact on healthcare outcomes.

Promoting and supporting the personal connection between patients and their provider is critical and should be a part of any program's model.

Having a personal connection with a patient allows the provider to fully understand the patient's true needs. It also can bring to light any social determinants they are facing that might cause a barrier to care or influence their willingness or ability to comply with their care or treatment plan.

These barriers and determinants include access to healthy food and or outdoor spaces, income, the cost of healthcare, work environment and hours, and emotional support systems. They influence everything about a patient's lifestyle and livelihood, down to how they access and follow through with medical care.

But these determinants and barriers are often very personal to a patient, and sometimes difficult to communicate, especially to a provider. Personal connections and compassion with patients allow them to be more comfortable and likely to share these barriers that might have a large impact on their health and care.

Having a personal understanding and connection with a patient can also help a provider understand what motivates their patient to make changes. Having a personal motivator is a game changer for many patients and helps them find a bigger meaning behind the work they put in, or for some, a reason to become healthy at all. It can also help patients stick with a program or lifestyle change when it becomes difficult.

One of Vital Incite's long time clients, Carmel Clay Schools, puts personal connections and compassion into practice every day with their Wellness Center.

¹ (n.d.). *Patients Don't Feel Their Doctors Are Compassionate, Survey Finds*. The Orsini Way. <https://theorsiniway.com/patients-dont-feel-their-doctors-are-compassionate-survey-finds/#>

² Doohan, I., & Saveman, B. I. (2015). Need for compassion in prehospital and emergency care: A qualitative study on bus crash survivors' experiences. *National Library of Medicine*.

The lead physician, Dr. Elisabeth Prosser, practices a comprehensive approach to healthcare at the center. This includes the center having primary care physicians, nurses and lab techs, a registered dietician, wellness coordinator, care navigator, physical therapists, mental health therapists, and more.

One thing Prosser values at the wellness center is the conversation she has with her patients, and her focus on understanding and finding a patient’s root motivation, their ‘why?’.

Prosser also deeply values her connection with her patients. She said that is one of her top priorities, so she can completely understand her patients’ needs and wants, and really make an impact on their health.

Exhibit A, below, models two different patients who visited the Wellness Center. Prosser’s conversations with Patient A revealed a clear and precise motivator, which allowed this patient to understand the impact of the work they were doing and the potential consequences to not following through with their care.

Patient B’s motivator, however, was a little muddier.

Exhibit A

	Patient A	Patient B
What	Experiencing knee pain	Wants to lose weight
Motivation given to Prosser	Likes to play outside with their grandkids, knee pain has proven to be a barrier to their time together	Said they have a wedding coming up where they will see their ex-partner
Next Steps	Prosser assessed the patient’s knee and crafted a care plan focused on getting the patient more physically active with their grandkids	Prosser began further conversation with the patient to understand a deeper motivator

For some patients like Patient B, understanding their deeper motivation is more difficult. Some don’t always understand their ‘why’ themselves. Many patients who claim their goal is weight loss alone, for example, have a deeper factor motivating them that is often under the surface.

Prosser’s conversations with Patient B said that their sole motivation of losing weight before seeing their ex-partner would likely not result in long-term or sustainable results. Prosser said many physicians might have offered some weight loss guidance and stopped their care there. But she understood that there was a deeper issue sparking this patient’s urgency to lose weight and began having conversations to help the patient understand sustainable weight loss and more long-term goals they can think of.

In the long run, addressing the root cause of a patient’s needs from the beginning of treatment can lessen the likelihood of seeking care in the future, and prevent a provider from implementing treatment plans that will have no impact long-term, resulting in wasted dollars.

Oftentimes, care at the Wellness Center overlaps with one of their mental health therapists. Coordinating their patients' care with a therapist has been a crucial aspect of Carmel Clay Schools' comprehensive offering. This not only allows patients to discuss their motivators with someone but connect their emotional health and wellbeing to their healthcare.

What will create change?

These relationships with patients are very highly driven by the providers themselves. This includes providers asking non-care related questions, making eye contact, expressing empathy and understanding and even just by remembering a patient's name.

But employers can also promote these relationships. Having an interested physician or provider is key to having better employee/provider relationships. This includes someone with a deep sense of empathy and who understands the importance of personal connections in healthcare.

A provider with great communication skills is also key, so they can better communicate with their patients and advocate for the needs of the employees (like communicating a need for a dietician, a physical therapist, or counselor).

Employers can advocate for longer office visits for their employees through direct contracting or top tier network development. This allows the providers and physicians to have more time to talk with patients and not be so rushed during appointments. Involving a company's HR or benefits team and even CFO is beneficial to the conversation and how the employer can better support their employees. If an employer can't influence the provider, then having a health coach or health advocate who can and will create this type of support has proven valuable. But just adding any coach or advocate will not necessarily create change. Those individuals will need appropriate training and support in order to provide a unique person-centric approach to care.