

Women and Their Health Care Providers: A Matter of Communication

Introductory Remarks

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Synopsis

This panel addressed five pertinent sets of questions involved in the communication process between women

and their health care providers. Does gender really make a difference in health service delivery? Are health professionals taught adequate communication skills? Do communication barriers stem from the clinical setting itself? What are the most important barriers to effective communication with respect to women and particularly elderly women? Has there been progress in communication between patients and health care providers?

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION is essential to the effective delivery of health care services, the achievement and maintenance of good health, appropriate diagnosis and treatment, patient satisfaction, and what doctors call "compliance," and the development of lifelong habits conducive to better health. All of these outcomes depend on the establishment of a team relationship between patients and health care professionals, with two-way communication.

Much has been written, at least speculatively, about the influence of gender on patient-provider communications. The experts who will discuss these issues represent a number of different institutions and disciplines. They bring a wealth of research, educational, and practical experience to bear on the subject.

To set the stage:

First, does gender really make a difference in the delivery of health care services?

Second, Alvin Tarlov has stated that, "It is time for a new reformation in the way medical students are taught." Do the curricula in our health professions schools provide adequate training in communications

skills, and are these skills maintained throughout the medical education process?

Alternatively, do barriers to effective communications stem from the characteristics of the clinical setting or from medical practice itself?

What are the most important barriers to patient-provider communications, in relation to women and, more particularly, elderly women, and what positive strategies can help overcome these barriers?

Lastly, I would add a question for the future. Are patients and providers both changing in ways that are important to effective communications? What are the implications of such macro-trends as the increasing physician supply, the increasing entry of women into the health professions field, and the aging of people who may differ significantly from previous generations in how we relate to health professionals?

We will begin with an overview of research, followed by a discussion of measures available to enhance patient-provider communications, and conclude with three discussions of various aspects of health professions teaching and practice.