

Using Cultural Competency to Improve Outcomes for Your African American Patients

A physician has just opened a new practice. His first patient is a 45-year-old African American male who complains of being constantly thirsty and making frequent trips to the restroom—then stops talking, sits back, and crosses his arms.

What should the physician do?

As a health care provider, you may be faced with an increasing number of patients with a culture or language different from your own. This could directly affect your practice, especially with patients from the increasing population of African Americans in the United States.

This guide focuses on cultural competency issues and addresses key problems that can lead to health disparities. The suggestions included here can help you maximize the effectiveness of your clinical encounters while improving the health care outcomes of your African American and other minority patients.

What is Cultural Competence?

“Cultural competence in health care refers to the capacity to provide effective medical care to persons of varied backgrounds through the use of appropriate knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors.”¹

Breaking the Cultural Barrier

The scenario above reveals issues that can affect patient-provider relationships and health outcomes. The patient’s verbal and nonverbal communication may indicate discomfort with the physician. It could also indicate a different cultural norm when interacting with authority figures, a different native language, and/or a different cultural expectation of the encounter. To ensure the best possible interaction, the physician should:

- ▶ Explore the patient’s expectations of the visit
- ▶ Reflect on how the patient presents his symptoms
- ▶ Consider how the patient may feel about the visit
- ▶ Determine if a translator is necessary
- ▶ Be alert for nonverbal cues and patient characteristics that can be misinterpreted

Nonverbal Cues and Patient Characteristics Often Misinterpreted by Providers¹

Cue or Characteristic	Providers Interpretation of Patient	Possible Outcome
Limited English proficiency	May lack ability to understand and comply	Diagnostic/treatment plans may be simplified
Patient asks few questions	May lack interest or understanding or is less committed to process	Patient may be given less education or involvement
Decreased eye contact		
Patient expresses vague symptoms	May have psychosomatic, self-limited, or benign illness	Diagnosis may be incorrect or symptoms may not be addressed
Animated or passionate expression of pain	May be a psychosomatic component or patient may be seeking pain medication	Lower dosage of pain medication may be prescribed

By recognizing cultural differences in communicating, you can help avoid misinterpretation. You can also take steps to enhance communications with your patient, which can help in making an accurate diagnosis and optimizing the outcome of the visit.

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“Evidence suggests that differences in verbal and nonverbal communication styles, expectations of the encounter, and understanding illness and treatment between patients and their healthcare providers may contribute to poorer outcomes in minority patients.”¹

Strategies to Enhance Patient-Provider Communications and Improve Medical Outcomes ¹	
Understand patient expectations of the encounter	What does the patient expect of treatment, care, respective roles, and outcomes?
Verify your interpretation of nonverbal cues and patient characteristics	Could there be any misinterpretations of culturally different communication styles (eg, reluctance to ask questions, decreased eye contact, extreme expression of pain, expression of vague symptoms, or other social cues that may be culturally defined)?
Explore your patient's explanatory model	Does the patient have a different understanding of his or her illness?
Use shared decision making to guide negotiation of treatment recommendations	Does the patient feel that you respect his or her preferences?

Unconscious Bias

Biases and stereotypes are other known causes of health disparities. Fortunately, overt expressions of bias have decreased over the years. Evidence suggests, however, that unconscious bias may exist even in the most open-minded individuals.¹ These influences may affect interpretations of patients' symptoms and clinical decisions. Following are strategies that have been shown to improve patient satisfaction and adherence, as well as health outcomes, in patients with different cultural backgrounds. Bear them in mind to maximize the effectiveness of your clinical encounters.

Strategies that Combat Unconscious Bias and Improve Medical Outcomes ¹	
Awareness	Be aware of any preconceived notions that may affect decision making
Self-reflection	Consider your assumptions during clinical encounters
Individualization vs Categorization	See patients as individuals to counteract unconscious biases
Affective empathy	View events and circumstances from the patient's perspective
Partnership building	Encourage patients to share responsibility for their treatment

Developing cross-cultural, patient-centered strategies, such as those outlined here, can help maximize your interactions with your African American and other minority patients while improving their outcomes. For more information about cultural competency, strategies for reducing biases, the use of interpreters, and addressing communication barriers, see *Cultural competency in healthcare: a clinical review and video vignettes from the National Medical Association*.¹

Reference:

1. Adapted from: Clarke ME and DeGannes CN. Cultural competency in healthcare: a clinical review and video vignettes from the National Medical Association CME/CE. <http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/573591>. Accessed October 4, 2008.