


# Words that Heal: Effective Communication When Serving Those in Need

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"Finding Help in an Ever-Changing World" –Psalm 121

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## Learning Objectives

1. Analyze communication barriers commonly encountered by underserved patient populations, including health literacy, cultural, and socioeconomic factors.
2. Apply evidence-based and faith-informed communication strategies to promote medication understanding and patient engagement when serving underserved populations.
3. Utilize effective communication techniques to address patient care scenarios involving underserved populations through case-based application.

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## The Path Before Us



- **Part 1:** Answering the Call
- **Part 2:** Why Communication is Key
- **Part 3:** Strategies for Effective Communication
- **Part 4:** Faith in Action

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## Part 1: Answering the Call


Introduction and Background

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## Speaker Introduction



- PGY1 and PGY2 residencies at the University of Georgia
- Alumni and faculty at St. John Fisher University in Rochester, NY
- Living out faith through:
  - Teaching
  - Weekly clinical practice
  - Mission and service

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## My Clinical Practice

"Love your neighbor as yourself." –Mark 12:31 and Matthew 22:39

- Federally Qualified Health Center
- Chronic disease state management
- Patients carrying significant burdens:
  - Financial constraints, refugee status, limited health literacy, housing instability, transportation challenges, distrust in healthcare system, disease and medication burden

*Healing can happen even without a prescription.*

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## Mission and Service



- Blackfeet Indian Reservation, MT- July 2017
- Houston, TX- March 2018
- Tampa, FL- March 2019
- Knoxville, TN- March 2020
- India- January 2023 & 2024
- Tanzania- August 2023
- Lima, Peru- August 2024
- Asheville, NC- March 2025



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## Part 2: Why Communication is Key



The Need for Effective Communication for Pharmacists

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## The Power of Our Words



*"The tongue has the power of life and death." –Proverbs 18:21*

- An opportunity to share the Gospel
- Communication is core to patient care
- Health literacy challenges
  - Almost 9 out of 10 patients or 80 million struggle with health literacy
  - Low health literacy is associated with medication errors, nonadherence, significant healthcare costs, and higher hospitalization rates

Talking Points about Health Literacy, October 16, 2024. Accessed April 4, 2026. cdc.gov.  
Woods NK, Ali U, Medina M, Reyes J, Chesser AK. J Prim Care Community Health. 2023 Feb 25;14:21501319231156132.

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## The Need for Healing Words



Health literacy	• Difficulty understanding dosing, diseases, drugs, labels
Language	• Communication more difficult, requires translators
Socioeconomics	• Transportation, food insecurity, unstable housing
Culture	• Different understanding of illness, medicine, healthcare
Fear & mistrust	• Prior negative experiences in healthcare

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## Why Communication Matters in Pharmacy



- Clear communication is critical in all pharmacy settings
- Miscommunication leads to loss of trust, medication errors, and nonadherence
  - Game of "telephone"



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## The Pharmacist's Role



*"Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones." –Proverbs 16:24*

- Biggest impact on addressing health literacy in research:
  - Pharmacists providing medication counseling and helping patients understand medication labels
- We interact with patients in a vulnerable position
- Our communication reflects Christ's character

Chan AMH. Addressing health literacy and patient communication from the lens of science. J Am Pharm Assoc. 2024;64(6):102268.

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## A Calling to Serve

- Our responsibility is not just telling but ensuring understanding
  - Following directions, just as Christians follow God's commands
- Our service is a reflection of God's love
- When serving patients, we will encounter those who have communication barriers

*"Let all that you do be done in love." -1 Corinthians 16:14*

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## Part 3: Strategies for Effective Communication

Evidence-Based Strategies and Techniques

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## Communication Strategies

Establish rapport	Empathy	Motivational interviewing	Plain language
Hands-on teaching	Open-ended questions	Interpreters	Teach-back
	Respecting other views	AMEN Protocol	

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## Establish Rapport


- Connection begins with shared humanity
- Start with:
  - Introduce yourself, ask where they're from, ask about their values and interests (family, work, hobbies)
- Listen more than speak
- Build trust over time
  - Trust allows future care to happen

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## Plain Language

- Jesus taught complex truths using parables, repetition, and everyday examples
- Examples of plain language:
  - Simple terms
  - Avoid medical jargon
  - Use everyday examples
  - Use pictures



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## Hands-On Teaching



- Allow patients to hold devices
- Walk through how to use devices while they practice
- Allows you to correct any behaviors and reinforce learning

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## Open vs. Closed-Ended Questions

**Open-ended questions**

- Requires more than a "yes" or "no" answer
- Instead of "Do you drink alcohol?", try: "How often do you drink alcohol?"
- More accurate interviews: allows the patient to share more information and avoids leading, biased answers

**Closed-ended questions**

- Can be helpful if you need to be direct
- Sometimes needed if open-ended questions will be awkward or confusing
- Can help clarify misunderstandings faster

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## Empathy

- Evidence shows empathy builds trust, patient satisfaction, adherence, & improved health outcomes
- Patients are more inclined to follow directions
- Consider the patient's point of view and avoid judgements
- Ask the patient:
  - "How do you feel about taking this medicine?"
  - "What concerns do you have?"

*"Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn."—Romans 12:15*

Atkinson M, Chasz B. How to demonstrate empathy and compassion in a pharmacy setting. The Pharmaceutical Journal. 26 April 2019.

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## Motivational Interviewing

- Many patients struggle with taking responsibility for their own health
- An approach to increase the motivation to change a behavior
- Avoids confrontation



Murugesu L, Heilmans M, Rademakers J, Franssen MP. PLoS One. 2022 May 4;17(5):e0267782. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0267782. eCollection 2022.

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## Motivational Interviewing- READS



**R**eport- establish with patient

**E**xpress empathy and reflective listening

**A**sk about patient goals/concerns and avoid arguments

**D**iscuss discrepancies between goals/values & behaviors

**S**upport when a patient is ready to change

Duff A, Latchford G. using motivational interviewing to improve medicines adherence. The Pharmaceutical Journal. 17 May 2016.

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## Respecting Different Views

- "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you."—Matthew 7:12*
- Some patients have different living styles and value alternative healthcare options
  - Natural remedies, home practices, traditional approaches
- A person's lifestyle shapes their health



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## Respecting Different Views

- Don't assume
- Listen
- Acknowledge your limits
- Educate
- Partner rather than correct

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## Teach-Back





- Ask patients to explain your instructions in their own words
- “I want to make sure I explained this clearly...”
- Not a test- a safety check!
- Improves patient understanding, confidence, adherence, and outcomes while reducing errors
- Also helps make sure you didn’t forget anything

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## The AMEN Protocol





- Created by clinicians at the Sidney Kimmel Comprehensive Cancer Center at Johns Hopkins
- A mnemonic to help providers with communication during challenging conversations

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## The AMEN Protocol




<b>A</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affirm</li> <li>• “I am hopeful, too”</li> </ul>
<b>M</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meet</li> <li>• “I am joining you in hoping and praying for a miracle”</li> </ul>
<b>E</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educate</li> <li>• “I want to speak to you about your father’s medical issues”</li> </ul>
<b>N</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No matter what</li> <li>• “No matter what happens, I will be with you”</li> </ul>

Cooper RS, Ferguson A, Bodurtha JN, et al. J Oncol Pract. 2014 Jul;10(4):e191-5. doi: 10.1200/JOP.2014.001375. Epub 2014 May 6


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## Working with Interpreters



- Speak directly to the patient (not the interpreter)
  - Maintain eye contact
  - Ask the interpreter to sit next to or behind the patient
- Speak in short sentences and use simple language
- Ask one question at a time
- Be aware of different dialects
- Respect dignity and differences



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## Mission Trips



- Magnify communication challenges
  - Language barriers
  - Limited time
  - Different health beliefs
- Principles remain the same
  - Emphasize partnership and stewardship
  - Be clear and humble
  - Establish a relationship before instruction



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## Part 4: Faith in Action



Case-Based Application

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### Practice Case 1



You are a pharmacist working in a community pharmacy in Western North Carolina. You are counseling a patient who is a refugee picking up amlodipine for hypertension. The patient nods throughout the encounter and says, "Yes, I understand." Two months later, the patient comes in for their next 30-day refill and a new prescription for lisinopril. You ask them about adherence, and they report they have not been taking their medication every day due to fear of side effects.

1. What potential communication barriers may be contributing to this situation?
2. What strategies could you use to address these barriers?

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### Practice Case 2



A 72-year-old Vietnamese patient is referred to you as the pharmacist at a Federally Qualified Health Center in the inner city of Rochester, NY to start an insulin pump for uncontrolled type 2 diabetes despite multiple oral medications and basal/bolus insulin. The patient expresses hesitation and seems overwhelmed by the information presented.

1. How can you help establish trust with the patient during this initial visit?
2. What strategies could you use to address any communication barriers?

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### Practice Case 3



You are an inpatient pharmacist in Athens, GA counseling a patient who is preparing for discharge and starting on apixaban for treatment of a pulmonary embolism. The patient speaks Spanish, and an interpreter is present.

1. How should the pharmacist adjust their communication approach using an interpreter?
2. Are there any other communication strategies that would be effective for this scenario?

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### Practice Case 4



While serving on a mission trip in India, a patient presents to your free medical camp with a tooth infection. He expresses worry about Western medicine and asks for a natural remedy.

1. How can the pharmacist respond in a way that reflects both professional excellence and Christ-centered compassion?
2. What communication techniques promote trust in this setting?

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### Key Takeaways



- Communication is clinical care and a ministry
- Love builds trust, which improves outcomes
- Words can confuse or heal
- Pharmacists are uniquely positioned to be accessible, trusted messengers

*"Let no unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up..."—Ephesians 4:29*

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Thank you!



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