

## Chasing the Monster

Toni Cordell

While attempting to do the task before her, a young woman stated in frustration, “I am only as good as the information I am given.” Communication offers an opportunity for understanding and success or misunderstanding and failure. As we all know, the lack of crystal clear health communication can put lives in danger.

Medical professionals have extensive training and education. Face to face with the doctor, health issues can be talked through if both the practitioner and the patient are on the same page while communicating. But some patients also hope that the doctor not only hears their words but also understands the feelings associated with them when they have the courage to express them. That puts a great deal of responsibility on doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals.

About 30 years ago, I visited the gynecologist knowing there was a problem (I later learned it was a prolapsed uterus). During the exam the physician said that the problem had “an easy repair.” I asked no questions. We just set the surgical date, and I showed up at the hospital for that “easy repair.”

I graduated from high school reading at the fifth grade reading level. When I was in school there was no help for those of us with learning problems. So, I’ve spent my life facing challenge after challenge and attempting to gain enough knowledge so I can feel normal.

Because of my poor reading skills, I simply signed every paper pushed in front of me at the admissions desk before my surgery. This was not my first surgical procedure, and I knew I was required to sign those papers in order to have the “easy repair” procedure. I didn’t read a single word. I didn’t even try because I suspected the medical jargon would make the documents too difficult to understand.

Looking back, it would have been so helpful if the documents needing my signature could have been mailed out ahead of

time. Then I could have gone over them at my own pace or asked my husband, an educated man with a high IQ, to check them out. Another option may have been to call ahead of time and request the paperwork so I could familiarize myself with it.

The surgery was a successful “repair.” However, during the 6-week follow-up appointment in the doctor’s office, the nurse walked into the examining room and cheerfully asked, “Toni, how are you doing since your hysterectomy?” Shocked and humiliated, I behaved as normally on the outside as possible. However, it caused an emotional overload with my insides screaming at me for being so stupid. The word hysterectomy meant they cut something out. That is more than a “repair.” How could it happen that I did not know? I just realized part of my body was cut out, and I only thought it was a surgical repair. Although I was not hoping for more children, it was still a traumatic day for me.

Several years ago, after numerous surgeries attempting to correct the organs in my lower abdomen, I was sent to a urologist, Dr Niall Galloway, at Emory University Hospital in Atlanta. His nurse told me that he gets all the train wrecks. Thankfully, he serves as an excellent example of a very positive experience within the medical community.

Of course at the initial appointment I had to deal with the clipboard and the papers needing my signature. By this point in my life I had been to an adult literacy program and my reading level had improved but I still loathed paperwork. I was led back into the examining room. Dr Galloway came in and sat chair to chair and face to face with me. We were both fully clothed. He asked lots of questions. Then as he left the room he instructed his nurse to prepare me for the physical exam.

When I was properly set on that horrible table and fully draped, Dr Galloway returned. Before he laid a hand on me, he spoke with care letting me know what he was doing and even

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warned me to expect the uncomfortable part. After Dr Galloway left the room, the nurse helped me take time to recover and get up right, and she asked if I needed any help to get dressed. So, when Dr Galloway returned, once again I was dressed. That tends to put physician and patient on more of a peer relationship. While in a paper or cloth drape one can feel vulnerable. Being dressed in street cloths takes some of that out of the encounter.

Dr Galloway clearly stated his evaluation and what he believed the treatment should be to correct the current problem. His Picasso-like hand drawings illustrated the places where there would be cuttings, stretching, and stitches. Although I am still not as good at asking questions as I need to be, Dr Galloway communicated so clearly that I went into that surgery very well informed of what to expect.

As a result of my interaction with the medical field and attending conferences on patient safety, I now know about the Ask Me 3 campaign.<sup>a</sup> Ask Me 3 gives a patient a place to start to become better informed and educated about his or her own medical needs. I never want to suggest that all of the responsibility for communication rests on the shoulders of the medical professional. It needs to be a partnership in which the patient also plays a role.

Many of us with low literacy skills or a poor education have emotional baggage from the many years of feeling stupid. After all, many of us sat in high school classrooms alongside of you. I graduated from high school reading at the fifth grade reading level. I know I am not your academic equal. I have a high regard for all who have earned a college education and beyond. But now I have learned that I no longer have to just do as I am told. I suspect one physician has written "noncompliant" on my chart because I argued with him about depression and refused antidepressant drugs. But it is my body and my life, thus it is my choice.

I have lived my life being attached to the stupid monster that is my lack of formal education. No, I am not suggesting I think there are really monsters around every corner waiting to get me. It is just that when I say or do something that reveals my lack of education I get slammed in the face with humiliation. So when a staff member in your office gets frustrated with me, I know it and I tighten up.

Most of the time, I make an effort to be very honest about my reading skill or lack thereof. After I sign the HIPAA papers, I hand the clipboard to the person at the desk and say, "I signed these, but I don't understand them." Most of the time that person just looks at me. Sometimes they will joke that they don't either. I believe at that moment I have just put the ball back in your court, and if there is a problem you could be open to a legal suit. I am not sure, just a guess. I am not personally interested in suing anyone.

Not all patients lack the education to communicate with medical professionals on a peer level. However, even those with advanced educations may not be at peak performance while visiting the doctor. What happens to those with college degrees when their temperatures soar over 100 degrees? Are they able to understand and follow every bit of instructions coming at them when a flu bug has moved in with a bit of diarrhea and vomiting? Okay go one step further. If the word cancer has just come out of the doctor's mouth, can you, at that moment, process all instructions to deal with that life-threatening illness?

Health literacy is not just a problem for those of us with a poor education. No matter how difficult the task, all medical decisions need to be made in partnership with the medical professional and the patient. That requires crystal clear communication with mutual respect. **NCMJ**

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a The Ask Me 3 campaign was developed by the Partnership for Clear Health Communication to improve communication between practitioners and patients. It endeavors to teach patients to ask 3 questions of the practitioner during a health encounter: What is my main problem? What do I need to do? Why is it important for me to do this? For more information, visit [http://www.askme3.org/for\\_patients.asp](http://www.askme3.org/for_patients.asp).