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Pediatrician's Communication skills: essential or complimentary? Mind the gap *

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abstract

OBJECTIVES: To provide empirical evidence and discuss the importance of Communication in everyday Pediatric practice through investigating the process by which parents select their children's pediatricians.

PATIENTS AND METHODS: A close-ended questionnaire has been administered to 500 parents in a EU country with a 95% response rate due to nature of the collection process (477 completed questionnaires) as the pediatrician was involved in the collection process.

RESULTS: Our empirical results demonstrate that the parents' selection priorities involve primarily the pediatricians' communication skills, followed by their accessibility and much less other factors such as experience. More specifically, accessibility over the phone and ability to explain the course and treatment of the illness constitute significant priorities for the parents.

CONCLUSIONS: Our study offers insight in the initial steps of obtaining child health care services, a relatively unexplored area of patient decision making and highlight the importance of communication skills and accessibility. Especially the triplet **Listen** - > **Explain** -> **Persuade** was found to be of paramount importance. Furthermore, we offer a Human Resources perspective, through a discussion of the implications of our findings on how private childcare clinics should recruit their specialists, as well as how they should train their specialists.

The academic motivation for this study comes from a series of articles, published mostly in this very journal¹⁻³ - most notably the work of Hickson et al.¹, on the importance of communication⁴⁻⁵ skills in everyday pediatric practice.

Even more motivation was ceased from the day-in-day-out practical experiences of the leading author while practicing as pediatrician among colleagues pediatricians in a private pediatric hospital of a major metropolitan area in an EU country. In the later environment, there are a lot of real-life examples where the lack of communication skills made real difference in the career of pediatricians, that while educated in the best schools could not achieve respective popularity among parents.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Communication skills cannot and should not substitute clinical skills. However excellence in clinical skills can only 'survive' in a lab environment, if it is not complemented with good communication skills. In practice, in a private clinic, in the ward of a children's hospital, in a home visit, communication skills are of paramount importance, if the pediatrician is to become popular and acceptable among parents. Furthermore, there is extensive evidence that lack of presentation and communication skills is perceived as clear lack of professionalism⁶.

Especially for pediatricians, where a triadic⁷ communication network takes place in every consultation - in between the pediatrician, the parent and the child (in our case the patient), being able to receive and disseminate information in an effective way is even more important. The fact that the child usually needs a mediator (the parent) in order to communicate, makes the whole consultation even more challenging for all the parties.

Furthermore, pediatricians play a significant role for the overall health education of the family; since they are the first medical subspecialty that come in contact with the family, they have a special role to educate in general the family on health issues ranging from immunisations, healthy-eating, to antimicrobial-agents use⁸ and in general to promote a well-functioning family⁹.

PATIENTS AND METHODS

Having established the importance of this topic for the professional pediatric practice, we decided to run a survey among parents so as to test if the communication skills are perceived to be as important, as the literature suggests.

Sample

The sample has been drawn from the population of a major metropolitan area in an EU country during the period of November and December 2010. In the regional area that the sample was taken from, 'Children healthcare' is offered through the following channels:

- *Primary care*: a network of private Pediatricians offering their services day and night including home visits, versus a network of Public Care Trusts offering outpatient appointments only in the mornings
- *Emergency Care*: in case of emergency parents can attend A&E units in one of the only two public children's Hospital in the metropolitan area (with population about four million citizens) or any of five private Children Hospitals.

It is worth noting that this is the first time in the literature that a similar survey runs either this specific region or in this specific EU country in general.

Survey Instrument

The close-ended questionnaire consists of twenty questions divided into three broad categories: *General, Experience, Communication* (see Appendix) including questions on the respective themes of interest, and was collected via face-to-face contact. We used three versions of the same questionnaire so as to randomise the sequence of questions and avoid having any effects on the results from the order of the appearance of the questions to the interviewees. People living in the sampling area are typically part of the 'labour class'. An interesting statistic was the level of engagement of the interviewees as 53.8% of respondents wanted to be informed of the results of this research and provided their personal contact details – however in a separate sheet in order to protect their anonymity.

Questionnaire Administration

The questionnaire has been administered to 500 parents in the region with a 95% response rate (477 completed questionnaires), due to nature of the collection process as the pediatrician was involved in the information collection process; the pediatricians themselves were helping the parents to fill in the questionnaire and they were present while the questionnaires were filled just in case a question from the parents end was arriving. The whole process did not last more than 5-7 minutes on average.

Data Analysis

Frequency distributions were calculated for all survey questions. Next, ANOVA analysis and paired t-tests were used to test the statistical significance of the mean-differences of all survey questions.

RESULTS

The first and most important result was which category seems to be more important for the parent in their selection process. The first one, consisted of ten factors was named ‘General’ covering all kinds of factors but the ones related specifically to ‘Experience’ – covering five specific factors, and the ones related to ‘communication skills’ that covered yet five more factors. We calculated the average across the respective factors (10-5-5) and created the average score per category in each category and then the mean average across the 477 questionnaires and the results are presented in table 1:

TABLE 1 Most Important category of factors

	#	GENERAL	EXPERIENCE	COMMUNICATION
Parents	477	3.21	3	3.75

Where we can observe that communication skills rank clearly first with 3.75/4 (and this is also a statistical significant difference at 95% through an ANOVA analysis). Experience is ranked third and general attributes ranked in the middle. In the remaining tables 2-4 we see each specific factor how exactly it scores in respect to the other factors in the same category.

TABLE 2 General factors

Recommendation	Convenience		
Word of Mouth	Proximity	Appointments	Home Visits
3.30	3.07	2.85	3.31
Accessibility		Emergency	
Phone	Weekends	Substitute Doctor	Private Hospital
3.82	3.64	3.09	2.79
Cost			
Cost per visit	Private Insurance		
3.21	2.89		

Accessibility ranks very high in this category - and in fact higher than any other factor across all three categories. Being able to reach your pediatrician through the phone seems to be the most important factor (3.82/4) – that is consistent with findings in the literature¹⁰, while being able to visit him/her during the weekends (3.62/4) is the second most important factor. Convenience factors such as home visits (3.31/4) as well as good reputation coming from word of mouth (3.30/4) seem to be quite important while the cost per visit is appearing to be less important (3.21/4) than what we might have expected.

All the statistics reported in tables 1-4 are the sample means for the respective factors. Statistical significance tests have been performed through ANOVA analysis and follow-up paired t-tests and any mean difference greater than 0.11 is also statistically significant difference at 95% level of confidence.

TABLE 3 Factors related to **experience**

Experience		Education		
Years practicing	Work in Private Hospital	Graduate Training	Attending Conferences	Sub-Specialty
3.32	2.80	2.89	3.08	2.90

The number of years practising seems to be the most important factor in this category (3.32/4) with everything else scoring relatively very low; all the factors in this category score much worse than the best two factors of the general category.

TABLE 4 Factors related to **communication** skills

Communication Skills				
Communication - general	Communication - with children	Listening	Explaining	Persuading
3.71	3.71	3.75	3.84	3.70

All five factors in this category score very high – and thus the very high average for the whole category as well. Explaining clearly seems to be the most important thing in the ears of the parents (3.84/4) and the sequential triplet **Listen -> Explain -> Persuade** of paramount importance.

CONCLUSIONS

Our study offers insight in the initial steps of obtaining child health care services, a relatively unexplored area of patient decision making; it highlights the importance of communication skills and accessibility.

There is no better way to conclude this study rather than coming back to our opening thoughts ...of the similarly well-educated colleagues pediatricians, **but** with a clear **gap** in the communication skills; it is unfortunate that this gap could have been filled through training either during the undergraduate/postgraduate studies, or during the residency or even through continuous and further education while practicing.

This latter issue is quite high in the agenda of AAP as it appears in a series of high profile articles on the necessity of efficient communication and consultation skills, as well as the need for effective intra-professional communication, skills that could be reached through innovative changes in the curricula at all education levels¹¹⁻¹³.

Furthermore, we offer a Human Resources perspective, through a discussion of the implications of our findings on how private childcare clinics should:

- **recruit** their specialists, since if for parents communications skills are very important then you can not just hire doctors prima-facia on their clinical skills but also through an extensive testing of their skills when communicating their experience (Human Resources Management implications)
- **train** their specialists, since it seems that there is no way to sustain excellence in this profession if you can not communicate professionally; thus a significant amount of resources needs to be redirected towards on-going training activities for improving the communications skills of your specialists (Human Resources Development implications)

At the end of the day effective communication will make the parents feel much more comfortable, relaxed and reassured and thus will make them perform in a much better way the required treatment and as such the final outcome of the illness will be much better. Furthermore, more relaxed and less-stressed parents will consequently mean a less-stressed child, thus a less-stressed patient, and as extensively evidenced a patient that will recover faster...

Bottom-line: *parents do need to be able to find a friendly, comprehensive and expert voice 24/7!*

We leave for further research a follow up round of panels and in-depth interviews where the detailed nature of this selection/decision making process will be fully revealed.

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APPENDIX

CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING YOUR PEDIATRICIAN				
<i>Categories</i>				
GENERAL	NOT Important	LESS Important	MORE Important	VERY Important
1. The distance of the surgery to your home	X			
2. Strong recommendation from someone (word of mouth)			X	
3. Accessible over the phone when you need him/her				X
4. Accessible in the weekends/bank holidays				X
5. Punctuality in the appointments schedule			X	
6. Makes visits at home			X	
7. When not available, he/she suggests another Pediatrician to see his/her patients				X
8. Has contacts and works with a private Pediatrician Hospital, in case of emergency	X			
9. Cost per visit				X
10. The cost of his services is partially/fully covered by Healthcare Insurance companies				X

EXPERIENCE				
1. Works for a private Pediatrician Hospital			X	
2. Has a Postgraduate degree			X	
3. Attends Scientific Conferences				X
4. Years in service			X	
5. Further Specialism (e.g. expert in Child Asthma)				X
COMMUNICATION				
1. Communication (in general)				X
2. Communication with children during the examination				X
3. Listening carefully to parent's concerns				X
4. Explaining clearly the diagnosis and treatment of the disease				X
5. Persuading of his/her scientific background/knowledge			X	
<p>This piece of research will enhance the understanding of what is important for parent when choosing their children's healthcare, and will inform the respective healthcare management bodies</p> <p>The RESEARCHERS</p> <p>Leave your contact details in a separate page</p> <p>..... if you want to be informed of the results of this research</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Thank You.</p>				