



Patient Satisfaction and Communication Skills of Healthcare Professionals: Cross Sectional Study at Benghazi Medical Center

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Background: communication skills play an important role in a healthcare professional's relationship with patients, which can influence their satisfaction.

This study aimed to determine whether patients attending the outpatient clinics of Benghazi Medical Center were satisfied with the communication skills they received from healthcare professionals as well as the association between communication skills and personal data.

Methodology: A cross sectional, descriptive study was conducted, using convenience samples of non-random sampling technique. A total of 344 outpatients participated in the study.

Data was collected by anonymous self-administrated questionnaire which consisted of 2 sections; the first section consisted of personal demographic information such as (patient's age, gender, employment, and educational level) and the second section consisted of 4 dimensions of

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communication skills which included: verbal communication, nonverbal communication, listening and persuasion skills. Patients reported their level of satisfaction toward communication on a 5-point Likert scale. Data analyzed by SPSS windows version 21.0.

Results: The study indicated that the overall mean score of satisfaction on communication skills was moderate, score (3.3849). Regards communication skills dimensions, the highest mean (3.459) for persuasion skills, followed by non-verbal communication, verbal communication and listening skills (3.390, 3.387 and 3.302 respectively).

From the result findings, there was a significantly difference between communication skills and gender and employment, ($P= .023$ and $P=.000$ respectively). Age and education levels had no significant relationships (association) with communication skills.

Conclusion and Recommendation: overall satisfaction rates were moderate and persuasion had the highest mean in communication skills dimensions from patient perspective. This study recommended that training health professionals on communication skills when dealing with patients and further studies to investigate the impact of communication skills on quality of care.

Keywords: Communication skills; satisfaction; verbal communication; nonverbal communication; outpatients; patient perspective; listening skills; verbal communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication is an essential interpersonal skill of healthcare providers requiring broad knowledge and high competence in practice. Furthermore, effective communication allows healthcare professionals to promote strong relationship and improve trust with patients, creating a positive experience that influences patients' behavior and attitudes [1].

Additionally, a successful communication is considered an influential approach that improve the quality of health care provided to the patients, because it contribute in providing an important information about their health conditions, understand their needs, listen to their concerns, and then incorporate the family in a shared decision-making process that related to an administrative procedures [2].

There are many different definitions of communication. Generally, communication can be defined as a process of sharing and giving meaning occurring at the same time through symbolic interactions. Communication has also been defined as a process that involves writing, reporting, correspondence, and understanding the mechanics of writing and speaking [3].

Based on that, communication involves a variety of skills, including, active listening, sending and receiving feedback, interpretation of body language (nonverbal cues), sympathy, persuasion, asking questions, and speaking. Therefore, clear communication skills are necessary to enable the sender and the receiver

to understand information exchanged between each other [4,5-7].

Moreover, Effective interpersonal communication (IPC) between health care professionals and patient is one of the most essential components of improving patient satisfaction, compliance and adherence to treatment, health outcome, and confidence in the competence and awareness of healthcare professionals and enabling the patient to explain health complaints related to his or her health condition. At the same time, there are other factors effecting effective interpersonal communication skills such as; patient and provider characteristics (e.g. age, gender, education, ethnic origin) [8,9-12].

In the medical field, learning and developing of communication skills play a vital role in treatment process. Therefore, a good communication is key to increase satisfaction level of patient and establish empathic relationship with patients [13]. While, poor communication skills may lead to patient dissatisfaction. Hence, dissatisfied patients are more likely to change treating doctors, the health care center, or even discontinuing medical advice, treatment and loss of trust between patients and health care professionals [14].

In this regard, a successful communication between healthcare professionals and patients is key to safe and high-quality health services [15]. This triggered the researchers to be aware of the vital role of patients' relation to the success or failure of a service as their perceptions play a significant role in assessing its quality [16, 17].

Several studies reveal that patient satisfaction is influenced by both medical and non-technical aspects. A factor that determines patient satisfaction is healthcare professional's ability to communicate both verbally and nonverbally with patients and their families [18].

Healthcare personnel must be able to communicate with patients in an effective manner due to the operational nature of hospitals and other healthcare facilities [19].

Furthermore, numerous studies about patient satisfaction and healthcare professional's communication skills have been carried out across different countries. Nonetheless, there haven't been many studies done in this topic in neighboring countries. In addition, there is a shortage of studies on patient satisfaction and communication skills in Libyan hospitals. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate the patient's satisfaction with healthcare professional's communication skills [20,21]. Accordingly, this study is of high significance because it is considered one of the first studies that focus on measuring patients' perception towards communication skills and their satisfaction level at hospitals in Libya; where it will be very helpful for developing communication skills and consequently, patient satisfaction and adherence would improve. This will also helpful to fill the gaps between patient's perceptions and expectations regarding communication skills of health care professionals, through specific strategies, in order to attract and retain patients.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Study Design and Setting

The descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted from August to October 2021 among patients who were attending outpatient clinics at Benghazi Medical Centre.

2.2 Sample Study Technique

A convenient non-probability sampling technique was employed by the researchers to enlist participants. The technique was selected in light of the ongoing Corona pandemic.

2.3 Sample Size

344 patients participated from different outpatient clinics and fulfilled the inclusion criteria of this study.

2.4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria included patients attending outpatient clinics and their age ≥ 20 years old. Patients who are communicating with different professions like physicians and nurses, patients who are able to speak Arabic or English, and patients who are willing to participate. Exclusion criteria included patients who do not respond to verbal stimuli and patients who were admitted to hospitals.

2.5 Method of Data Collection

The data was collected by Self-administrated that was been adopted from a previous study to assess the level of patients satisfaction on healthcare professionals communications skills [19].

Although researchers assessed content validity and reliability, seven academic experts from Public Health College, University of Benghazi, evaluated the questionnaire for their clarity and practicability, and some minor modifications were made. The questionnaire has already been confirmed (Alpha coefficient Cron-bach is 0.95). The questionnaire consists of two parts: The first part obtained information about socio-demographic data such as gender, age, qualification, and occupation. The second part is concerned with collecting data related to communication skills, which consists of 24 questions. Non-verbal communication skill (6 questions), listening skill (6 questions), and persuasion skill (5 questions). The response to each question was a 5-point Likert scale with scores of Strongly Disagree = 1.0–1.49, Disagree = 1.50–2.49, Neutral = 2.50–3.49, Agree = 3.50–4.49, and Strongly Agree = 4.50–5.0.

2.6 Collection Procedure

The selected patients completed a structured questionnaire after leaving the clinic. If the participant was illiterate or had low literacy, the questions were read for them and their responses were recorded. Questionnaire completion took a minimum of 15 minutes with each patient.

2.7 Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21 was used for data entry and analysis. Descriptive statistics such as

frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation were used to analyses the present information. Also, Pearson’s correlation coefficients were calculated to test associations between categorical variables; P-values < 0.05 are considered statistically significant.

3. RESULTS

The majority of the participants were female 56.4%, while males were 43.6%. Regarding age, the patients aged above 20 to 29 years old were 39.8% and 27.6%. The respondents were aged between 30 and 39 years old. In addition, approximately 17.4% were between the ages of 40 and 49. Only 1.2% of the patients were aged 70 years and older. In regard to the level of education, 41.3% of the respondents have an undergraduate educational level, while around 31.1% have an educational level at school. In terms of employment status, the majority of the participants 57.8% worked. Only 42.2% of the respondents were unemployed.

3.1 The Out Patients Satisfaction Mean Score with Healthcare Professionals Communication Skills

According to Table 2, the outpatients stated that their satisfaction with their interactions with healthcare professionals was rated with the following five highest mean scores: If a patient responds to treatment, hospital staff is eager to reassure them that their health condition will improve (M = 3.58; SD = 0.959), followed by The language and techniques used by hospital staff

are suitable for the patients' age and cultural background (M = 3.56; SD = 0.961). In addition, “healthcare professionals take the time to thoroughly explain what is needed in order to treat patients (M = 3.51; SD = 1.007), When speaking with patients, hospital staff uses simple language and idioms (M = 3.48, SD = 0.951), and Healthcare professionals are conscious of their looks when interacting with patients. (M=3.44; SD=1.006). Conversely, the four lowest mean score statements were: “Healthcare professionals tend to listen to what patients want to say and avoid getting distracted by things like pens, phones, computers, or watches. (M = 3.10; SD = 1.205), followed by Healthcare professionals listen to patients while doing their task without appearing bored (M = 2.24; SD = 1.076), Healthcare professionals determine the most suitable time to speak with patients (M = 2.28; SD = 1.062. And while interacting with patients, healthcare professionals always have a positive smile on their faces.” (M=3.3; SD=1.106).

3.2 Mean Score of Overall Outpatient’s Satisfaction with Communication Skill Sorted by Highest Mean Rating

Table (3) shows that the mean patient's overall satisfaction was 3.3849 out of 5. It suggests that, in regards to of the communication skills of healthcare professionals, their level of satisfaction was moderate. (NVCA, VCA, LS), however, the ability of healthcare professionals to persuade was rated as having the highest mean score by patients.

Table 1. Patient characteristics (N = 344)

Variable		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	150	43.6 %
	Female	194	56.4%
Age	≤20-29	137	39.8%
	30-39	95	27.6%
	40-49	60	17.4%
	50-59	32	9.3%
	60-69	16	4.7%
	70 >	4	1.2%
Education (Degree)	illiterate	24	7%
	School education	107	31.1%
	Diploma	53	15%
	Undergraduate	142	41.3%
	Postgraduate	18	5.2%
Employment	Unemployed	145	42.2%
	Employed	199	57.8%

Table 2. Distribution of outpatient Satisfaction with communication skill of health providers

Item	Mean	SD
Verbal communication skills		
1. Healthcare professionals speak to their patients at a pace that makes sense to them.	3.34	1.009
2. Patients are frequently treated by healthcare professionals with passion and vigor.	3.40	0.997
3. Healthcare professionals speak in simple words when conversing with patients.	3.48	0.951
4. Healthcare professionals take the time to thoroughly explain what is needed in order to treat patients.	3.51	1.007
5. Healthcare professionals determine the most suitable time to speak with patients.	3.28	1.062
6. Healthcare professionals consider patients' psychological well-being when interacting with them.	3.35	1.117
7. When patients have queries, healthcare professionals answer them politely and patiently.	3.34	1.175
Nonverbal communication skills		
1. While interacting with patients, healthcare professionals always have a positive smile on their faces.	3.31	1.106
2. Healthcare professionals converse with patients while focusing on their faces (eye contact).	3.42	0.972
3. Healthcare professionals listen and converse with patients while making expressive facial expressions.	3.36	0.997
4. When interacting with patients, healthcare professionals take care that they sits in the proper position.	3.35	1.096
5. Healthcare professionals are conscious about their looks when interacting with patients.	3.44	1.006
6. Healthcare professionals make hand gestures when discussing and explaining to patients.	3.46	0.950
Listening skills		
1. Healthcare professionals tend to listen to what patients want to say and avoid getting distracted by things like pens, phones, computers, or watches.	3.10	1.205
2. When speaking with patients, healthcare professionals are careful not to interrupt them.	3.34	1.095
3. Healthcare professional listen to patients while doing their task without appearing bored.	3.24	1.076
4. When speaking with patients, healthcare professionals genuinely care about their emotions.	3.36	1.029
5. Healthcare professionals are able to pay close attention to patients' interactions and comprehend their needs and preferences.	3.38	1.000
6. Healthcare professionals possess the capacity to take in and interpret every word that patients say.	3.39	1.996
Persuasion skills		
1. Healthcare professionals are very confident in their ability to persuade patients about their conditions.	3.47	0.992
2. Healthcare professionals adopt techniques and language that are suitable for the patients' age and cultural background.	3.56	0.961
3. Healthcare professionals were keen to talk with patients about possible courses of treatment or diagnostic tests and give them the chance to participate in the decision.	3.31	1.047
4. If a patient responds to treatment, healthcare professionals are keen to reassure them that their health condition will improve.	3.58	0.959
5. Healthcare professionals are highly skilled and knowledgeable in persuading patients of their health status.	3.38	1.078

Table 3. Mean score of overall outpatient’s satisfaction with communication skill sorted by highest mean rating

Domains	questionnaire items (no)	Mean (SD)	Satisfaction
The Skill Of Persuasion(SOP)	5	3.4593 (0.787)	Good
Nonverbal Communication Abilities(NVCA)	6	3.390 (0.690)	Moderate
Verbal Communication Abilities(VCA)	7	3.387 (0.741)	Moderate
listening skill.(LS)	6	3.302 (0.8536)	moderate
Total Communication skills		3.3849 (0.6534)	

Note: *Scores ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

Table 4. The association between levels of satisfaction with healthcare professional’s communication and demographic data

Variable			Mean	SD	F	P Value
Communication	Gender	Male (152)	3.2908	.71553	5.252	.023 *
		Female(192)	3.4595	3.4595		
	Employment	Unemployed (145)	3.4458	.52382	12.571	.000*
		Employed (199)	3.3405	.73173		
	Age	<20-29	3.4161	.58238	.844	.519
		30-39	3.4097	.69108		
		40-49	3.3821	.77359		
		50-59	3.3303	.61464		
		60-69	3.0861	.57967		
		70&more	3.4313	.65565		
Education (Degree)	illiterate		3.5105	.65192	1.313	.265
		School education	3.4484	.59909		
		Diploma	3.4399	.60468		
		Undergraduate	3.2912	.67183		
		Postgraduate	3.4175	.89931		

3.3 The Association between Levels of Satisfaction with Healthcare Professional’s Communication and Demographic Data

Table 4 revealed that there was no significant relationship between patient’s age, education degree, and level of patient satisfaction with healthcare professional’s communication skills ($p > 0.05$). Although, the results indicated that there was a significant association between gender, employment, and the level of patients’ satisfaction with the communication skills of healthcare professionals ($p < 0.05$).

4. DISCUSSION

Healthcare professional’s communication skills are considered to play an important role in patients’ satisfaction. This study aimed to investigate patients’ satisfaction with healthcare professional’s communication skills. In addition, the relationship between patients’ demographic

variables and their perception of communication skills will be assessed.

This study found that the overall patient’s satisfaction with healthcare professional’s communication skills was moderate. This was consistent with previous studies, which indicated that patients were highly satisfied with physician and nurse communication and courtesy. In addition, other studies indicated that the majority of patients were able to communicate with their physicians and nurses without any barriers [1,2,3].

Another study conducted in Saudi Arabia in a primary healthcare center in Riyadh revealed that the majority of the patients were satisfied with the communication and attitude of the staff [4].

However, two different studies reported low patient satisfaction with nursing communication in a regional hospital in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and a Sina hospital in Tabriz, Iran [8,13].

Regarding the verbal communication dimension, the present study revealed that patients were satisfied with healthcare professional-friendly interaction, speaking in language that patients could understand and explaining to them what is needed in terms of their medication. This is similar to other Middle Eastern nations, such as Iran in Isfahan, which reported that patients were satisfied with understanding the information that was given to them by the physician [14]. Another study conducted in the city of Tabriz, Iran, also indicated that physicians explaining diagnosis and treatment and their friendly interactions with patients were considered to play a vital role in driving patients' satisfaction [15].

Similarly, the present study finding is in line with previously reported results in Nepal, which stated that physicians' friendly and courteous manners contributed to high levels of patient satisfaction with communication. This was due to the physician's communication skills [16]. Furthermore, in south-west Ethiopia, patients were dissatisfied with the incomplete information regarding their illness received from their physicians and nurses [17]. According to a previous study, which indicated that the higher the level of information provided to patients, the greater their levels of satisfaction [14].

Concerning the nonverbal communication skills dimension, the present study indicated that patients rated nonverbal communication as moderate. A previous study indicated that nonverbal communication was a strong predictor of patients' satisfaction. Furthermore, the same study revealed that the majority of study respondents rated the nonverbal communication of health care providers as excellent [18]. The current study also showed that patients agreed that healthcare professionals make eye contact during communication. This result was similar to a previous study, which revealed that the majority of patients agreed that during communication, nurses make eye contact [19]. Moreover, the study's findings revealed that patients were satisfied with healthcare professional's appearance. This result agrees with a study conducted in other Arabic countries, such as Saudi Arabia, which indicated that patients' satisfaction with nurses' dressing well [8].

Regarding the listening skill dimension, the present study results indicate that patients were moderately satisfied with this dimension. Patients who are moderately satisfied with healthcare

providers have the ability to listen to them without interruption while performing their task. However, another study that was conducted in Tabriz, Iran, reported that patients were not satisfied with the nurse's ability to listen to their concerns and were only interested in completing the task [13].

A previous study in Isfahan, Iran, reported that active listening or effective dialogue with physicians during visits has a significant relationship with patients' satisfaction [14].

Another earlier study in Tabriz, Iran, on physician communication and patient satisfaction reported that physician listening skills have no significant correlation with patient satisfaction [15].

Moreover, in regards to persuasion skills, the study analysis revealed that patients' satisfaction was good in general. However, patients were moderately satisfied with healthcare professional's ability to discuss with patients their treatments, explain their diagnosis, and involve them in decision-making. This finding was in line with a study in Tabriz, Iran, which stated that patients were dissatisfied with nurses' ability to consider their opinion and preference regarding their treatments or plans for their care [13]. Another study has shown that increasing patient participation will increase patients' satisfaction [14].

In addition, the study revealed that patients' satisfaction level with healthcare professional's communication skills was measured by the following dimensions: precautionary skills, considered to be the first and second dimensions; nonverbal communication skills; verbal communication skills; and listening skills. This result was incongruous with a study conducted in Sudan, which revealed that patients' satisfaction level for communication skills was as follows: verbal communication skills came first, followed by listening skills, nonverbal communication skills, and lastly, precautionary skills. [22] This is because maintaining adequate communication is considered challenging for healthcare professionals working in large hospitals who have to serve a large number of patients in a short work shift [23].

The study analyzed sociodemographic factors associated with patients' satisfaction with communication, namely age, gender, educational level, and employment status. The present study did not detect any correlated association between patients' age, educational level, or

satisfaction. These results come in agreement with previous studies, which did not observe any significant association between sociodemographic variables and satisfaction [19,17]. On the other hand, the current results are inconsistent with many previous studies that stated age was associated with satisfaction [24,25,26]. Besides, the findings of the present study were incongruous with those of other previous studies, which indicated that educational level has a significant correlation with satisfaction. It is believed that patients with a higher level of education have a lower level of satisfaction [1,26,18]. whereas the present study shows that gender and employment status have a significant correlation with patients' satisfaction with communication skills. This result is in agreement with the literature conducted on patients' satisfaction, which reported that there was a significant direct relationship between gender and satisfaction [13,4,25,26,27-29].

In contrast, many previous studies reported that there was no significant correlation between gender and patients satisfaction with communication skills [14,19].

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The patients in this study were moderately satisfied with the overall communication skills of health professionals. They were satisfied with their persuasion skills but reported only moderate satisfaction in the other three communication dimensions.

The findings showed that communication skills were statistically significant by gender and employment.

The study suggested implementing communication skills training (both verbal and nonverbal) for healthcare professionals to improve their interactions with patients.

Encourage health professionals through workshops and sessions on the importance of listening, building strong relationships, and developing persuasive abilities when interacting with patients.

Hospital policymakers should consider the essential role it plays in developing strategies to improve the communication skills of health professionals.

This study was conducted on patients in one hospital during the COVID-19 pandemic, which

may limit its generalizability. Therefore, it is recommended that future research be conducted with a larger sample size and over longer periods in other hospitals.

In addition, it is recommended that further studies be conducted to investigate the impact of communication skills on patient satisfaction and quality of care.

CONSENT AND ETHICAL APPROVAL

All required official and ethical approvals have been achieved. The purpose of the study was clarified to all patients, and they were assured that their answers would be kept completely confidential. Verbal informed consent was obtained from each participant before completing the questionnaire. The research team distributed and collected questionnaires manually on the same day.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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