

communication

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INTRODUCTION: Peter Little has called "communication" a chameleon word — one that changes its meaning and application with each person who uses it. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines the word as follows: "Communicate — to import, transmit, share". The nature of communication is very complex and we shall here discuss only the practical aspect of communication as the *PROCESS* governs human relations. The value of efficiency in practical communication to the medical profession cannot be overemphasised; this is inclusive of such specific activities as reading a paper, conducting a meeting or an interview (a viva voce or oral examination, or what you may choose to call it) apart from the all important confrontation with the patient.

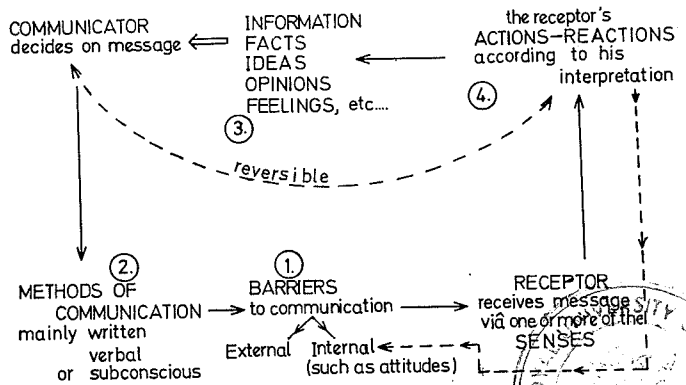
THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS: This on analysis proves to be a closed loop or feedback mechanism which may fail or disrupt at one or more points.

This model implies that any communication essentially entails a communicator and a receptor, and that these positions are reversible during the process, so that a discussion of one reveals as much of the second. We will therefore review positions one to four in the diagram under the following respective headings:—

- (1) Barriers to Effective Communication.
- (2) Clear Thinking; Verbal and Written Expression
- (3) Information Sources
- (4) Interpreting and Recording Information.

1 BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION:

This is the weakest link in the loop and hence reflects not only the strength of the process but also the general causes of so much "interference with our transmission". These barriers are in general either external noise, heat



and cold; or internal pressures (arising out of lack of knowledge about ourselves and other people) that make us at odds with ourselves and others. Our contacts as individuals are so few and so varied that we have little real experience of people. Moreover human behaviour is like an iceberg — always only barely visible.

The cause of many unexpected reactions to a message is the conflict in a person between his thinking and his emotional side. The ability to think rationally varies a lot from individual to individual, and both thoughts and emotions have a say on his eventual behaviour. But it is when the latter are in control that he distorts information and reacts to a message in a way not intended. This may be subconscious but if the person is aware he will try to justify himself by "reasoning" and finding excuses for his behaviour.

Emotional reactions are the source of irrational behaviour which comes into action when we meet with something quite new. Our personal survival is at stake, and accordingly we either fight or flee. It is here obvious that we need to control our instinctive desire for otherwise we would be at the mercy of every circumstance. Moreover if one could not exert social control, society itself would become a jungle since more of us live a life apart from other people. When the receptor takes in the message he makes a mental pattern of the available information. This, however, is not a photographic reproduction but a picture largely determined by experience, expectations and wishes. Concepts are therefore highly personal and this limits each of us. Our previous experience is in its turn limited by such things as abilities and opportunities.

People also act strangely because of preconceived ideas associated with previous experience. These attitudes often determine the character's behaviour in a specific circumstance. It is important to realise that however rational an attitude appears it has an emotional support. This emotion supplies the driving force of our behaviour and can create the most difficult barrier to effective communication. It follows that we can never ignore attitudes in ourselves or others. When we wish to impart something to someone we must identify attitudes as early as possible so that we can predict what reactions he is likely to have if we approach him.

2 CLEAR THINKING, VERBAL AND WRITTEN EXPRESSION:

The expression "clear thinking" does not tell us a great deal; it would be more instructive to observe that unclear thinking may stem out of supersti-

tion, self-interest, laziness or fallacies of relevance or of ambiguity. The first two of these are simple; as for the third, all of us tend to grow lazy and prefer to accept certain traditional beliefs without adjusting to changing times; we tend often enough to fall with the majority and cease to think independently. *Jepson* in his book "Teach Yourself to Think" says: "As long as we neglect the duty of thought, all sorts of beliefs will appear in our minds... we shall be at the mercy of anyone in whose interest it is to manufacture them".

In fallacies of relevance the communicator introduces ideas that have nothing to do directly with the latter being discussed. In doing this he plays on emotions such as pity, fear, reverence, disapproval, enthusiasm or force: At the Yalta Conference, Churchill told Stalin and Roosevelt that the Pope suggested a certain course of action to which the Russian leader replies "And how many divisions has the Pope?".

In fallacies of ambiguity the speaker changes the meanings of words he uses during the course of an argument, to gain his own ends. Thus it is obvious that most of our thinking is not good enough, the trouble being that the arguments are often the result of personal wishes and the energy we put into trying to make them come true. It is only by reasoning — the making of inferences and the drawing of accurate conclusions — that enable us to support and sustain our arguments and demolish unfounded ones.

Verbal communications can break down and often does for a number of reasons: The major one is overconfidence; we know that we have managed to get by with the aid of the spoken word for so long and through so much of life that we take the spoken word for granted: one is then shocked to learn that over 50% of our communication is misunderstood, rejected, distorted or forgotten. Through haste we often open our mouths and think afterwards so that it is only when the results are obvious that we realise a mistake. Clear thinking is not only required but required before one does or says something and not as he does so. Poor presentation (both in the literal sense as say talking at a distance, and in the metaphoric meaning) is another vital consideration. The very words we use must be well chosen, something which is not so difficult with experience; the sentences we compose must be simple and straight forward with emphasis laid in the proper places. Something more positive is to check whether one has understood your communication or that you understood what you are told. As to the latter case, listening is an art difficult to acquire. It needs patience, flexibility of mind, willingness to forget for the moment what you are thinking and to focus your attention on what the other person is saying. A determined effort must be made to understand the message and to check if necessary on any equivocal or doubtful points. Verbal communication is even more advantageous if it is to face-to-face for this gives the communicator his best chance of making sure that the listener knows what he has to do and that he is able

to do it. Provided one takes advantages of this, uses the feedback that comes back through the looks, changes in the face and answers to questions, verbal communication improves considerably.

In the medical world paper-work procedures are an important way of reading a wide, scattered and varied number of receptors; people to whom it is impossible to speak personally. The piece of paper may also be used as a record to be read by you or there later on. This system though essentially a good one, depends however on the "writing skill" of the people using it. Through this medium one can build a picture with the relevant information, one can analyse a situation or persuade readers on to his way of thinking; the communicator can alternatively easily baffle, annoy and frustrate the receptor and you cannot be at the readers' elbow to explain or develop the ideas behind your words — this would otherwise boil down to face-to-face contact. The whole trouble is that you have to use words and often even worse symbols. Sometimes the meaning is quite clear, and yet the desired effect is not reached. This is in sharp contrast to verbal expression when one can modify what he said to get where he wants or alternatively inch himself slowly till he leads the receptor precisely to the reaction intended. For effective written communication one must have a purpose and he must frame his information on one good structure with the right approach and layout. Thus the purpose of note-making may be that of an aid to memory, analysis and clear thinking.

3 **INFORMATION SOURCES:** These are varied but the information one requires in any circumstance does not fall into his lap if he merely sits back and waits for it. One must develop and exercise good powers of observation. Knowledge must be sought out with something next to the newspaper reporter's "nose for news" and yet one must behave in such a way as to attract incoming communication. The reporter's standard questions: What? Who? When? Where? How? Why? often come in handy.

Information required whether in a committee room, a lecture room, the ward or the patients' house comes from four main sources:—

1. *Physical objects and events* — one must become very observant of his physical surroundings especially when they look the ordinary. Methodical accurate and complete observation comes with self-training.

2. *People and their actions* — A "Sherlock Holmes" attitude is here likely to breed a similar attitude to people. One could actually go on for ever on this; it is however worth pointing out that provided you do not jump to conclusions (for first impressions may be misleading) one can observe people's conduct to pick up clues to their thoughts and feelings. It is useful to notice the communication which people send out despite themselves: an

involuntar gesture perhaps, a fixed or a fleeting facial expression or fidgety movements.

3. *Reading matter*: this can be as varied as the fish in the ocean and I do not propose to discuss anything except the ways whereby one can communicate effectively with this information source. These are in ascending order of thoroughness:—

Reference — as for dictionaries, directories and statistical compendia;

Scanning — looking for some topic which may be in a book especially by using the index;

Skinning — picking up the general drift without absorbing all the details; here one makes use especially of any headings and illustrations; of the openings or “signposts” to the paragraphs and of just the “food” in the chapter.

Reading for meaning — getting a broad impression but leaving examples to fall by the wayside.

Study reading — reading and rereading so completely that you can reproduce it in your own words. Note making or summaries often come in here.

Critical reading — forming an opinion of a text after a good study of it to compare your ideas with those of the author.

One can even apply these methods consecutively to the same reading material.

4. *Finally the mass media*: These today are no less important as a source of medical information and communication.

h INTERPRETING AND RECORDING INFORMATION:

Making sure of the facts is one of the marks of the scientific mind. As far as other people's statements go if these arouse strong feelings in you because you have other views, you may fail to register exactly what they would like to convey to you. It has been truly said that “A mark of the mature mind is the ability to read and understand statements which are in contradiction to one's own beliefs”. Vagueness often characterises many expressions which come readily to lazy or hasty minds and these expressions must therefore be probed, measured and inquired into.

Though this tends to apply mostly to verbal expression it can be equally important in written communication. To make sure of the facts and possibly of the

emphasis in some statements (that is if these have been framed well enough) one ought to reread and stop to consider parts of this (if this warrants such a treatment of course). The fact that we are living in the twentieth century when time is reckoned in seconds only means that the communicator should present his message concisely and in a coherent manner to facilitate understanding, interpretation and recording; it also implies that the true value of the communication is to be weighed as accurately as possible to eliminate serious waste.

In this second step — that of evaluating the significance of the facts and seeing what valid inferences if any can be drawn from them, a scientific approach is also worthwhile. What scientists do is to form a provisional theory — a “hunch” which is then tasted, modified or even rejected. In practical everyday life one hardly needs to go to such lengths, though the scientifically minded do most of this subconsciously and in good order.

CONCLUSION: The meaning of practical communication has been analysed very briefly and in rather perhaps a too superficial manner. Yet the reader is expected to appreciate its exact value; indeed the topic derives its worth from the current social and economic waste, inaccuracies, and trouble, it can eliminate when well understood and practised; it is the subject to be introduced in any university course with no little gain.

Observation: No apology is made for lack of examples, any member in the medical field has sufficient personal experience which amply illustrate the points being made.

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“The Doctor who smokes is like a clergyman with a mistress” — Professor Lawther, of Industrial Medicine of London University.