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BY INVITATION

A doctor's prescription for doctors: Show them you care

A cardiac surgeon shares his guiding principle of the past 25 years: build a bridge of trust with patients, show them you feel their pain



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In JK Rowling's popular novel, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, there's a line that goes: "Doctors? Those Muggle nurses that cut people up?"

That is an interesting phrase to use for a doctor, but it's far from appropriate. The phrase, however, brings into focus the topic of this article: the mistrust of people towards doctors. We have only 1 million modern medicine doctors to treat our 1.3 billion people (130 crore people). This ratio is far less than the WHO-prescribed number.

Just look at our overcrowded public hospitals. A recent report says that an average doctor spends only two minutes per patient. In those two minutes, the doctor has to listen to the patient's complaint, go through all the records, physically examine the patient, make a diagnosis, write out the required investigations, and prescribe the treatment.

Is it possible that a doctor can

achieve such mastery over his social skills that within two minutes, he can not only diagnose what is wrong and prescribe proper medication, but also make the patient feel cared for? It is easy to imagine why despite the best intentions, the doctor-patient equation gets compromised in the process.

To say that the doctor-patient relationship is poor would be an understatement, given the times we live in, when healthcare violence has become a concern. A paper published in the *National Medical Journal of India* confirms this poor relationship: it says that over 75 per cent of doctors have faced violence at work.

So what is the solution? Reducing the shortage of doctors, staff and hospital beds will take decades and require hundreds of billions of rupees in investments. Do we have the time and financial resources required?

For the young doctors of today, let me share an incident during my formative years as a trainee cardiac surgeon, which has been immensely helpful to me, in the last two decades of handling some of the most complex and emergency situations.

When I was a young doctor at Cleveland Clinic, we had a farewell

party for one of the retiring surgeons at the clinic, the legendary Dr Paul Taylor. The hospital lawyer said Dr Taylor was one of the very few doctors in the history of the Cleveland Clinic who had never been sued. It was not that Taylor did not face complications. In fact, he faced probably more complications because he used to conduct the maximum number of surgeries. The reason was his impeccable behaviour and exemplary empathy towards his patients.

Dr Taylor would genuinely cry with a patient's relatives if the patient was not doing well. Watching him empathise with his patients left a very deep impression on me. Indeed, it has been my guiding principle in my cardiac surgical practice of more than 25 years, including handling some of the most complex cardiac cases in the world. My message to my overworked and sleep-deprived doctor colleagues is this: In the current scenario, we might not be able to increase the two minutes we have with each patient or improve the abysmal condition of our hospitals. But we have a choice about how we use the two minutes we have in the Out Patient Dept (OPD) or the few minutes before or after a procedure. Show your patients and relatives that you genuinely feel their pain and care for them. Give undivided attention to them in those two minutes. Before a procedure, explain all the possible complications, and if there is an unfortunate complication, explain to relatives as many times as possible, instead of avoiding them.

This is the only way to build a bridge of trust between doctors and patients. Hermann Nothnagel, one of the most eminent clinicians in the second half of the nineteenth century said, "Only a good man can be a great physician." True, that!

The writer is Vice Chairman & Managing Director, Asian Heart Institute. Views expressed are personal.



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