

How important are soft skills for medical professionals?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines soft skills as ‘personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people’. Soft skills, often referred to as transferable or professional skills, are intangible, non-technical, and are the personal character traits or qualities to help succeed in any profession.¹ For medical professionals, soft skills such as communication, teamwork, patience and compassion are vital to effectively engage with patients, their families and coworkers.

In 2007, a study of 240 medical errors by trainees, including 167 breakdowns in teamwork, identified poor non-technical skills as the main cause. By contrast, 139 errors were attributed to lack of technical competence.²

Teamwork is a critical soft skill for medical professionals to safely and compassionately deliver patient care. In surgery, increasing effective teamwork between multi-disciplinary teams is found to decrease patient mortality rates.³ This shows the significance of soft skills in saving lives.

Effective communication skills can help identify patient needs. Medical professionals communicate with one another and patients in various ways including written, face-to-face, and virtually. Written communication is key to making referrals, updating patient records and prescribing medication.⁴

¹ Ashley Rego. “Soft skills: Who says they can’t be taught?” *Canadian Journal of Medical Laboratory Science* 79:2 (2017): 11

² Hardeep Singh, Eric J. Thomas, MD, MPH, Laura A. Petersen, MD, MPH, “Medical Errors Involving Trainees: A Study of Closed Malpractice Claims from 5 Insurers” *JAMA Internal Medicine* 167:19 (2007): 2030-2036

³ Andrew Jenkinson. “Teamwork in Surgery” *The Laparoscopic Consultant* <https://www.laparoscopicconsultant.co.uk/pdf/teamwork-in-surgery.pdf> [Last Accessed: 3rd Jan 2020]

⁴ Evie Lee. “Effective Communication in Health and Social Care” *CPD Online College* (2021) <https://cpdonline.co.uk/knowledge-base/care/effective-communication/> [Last Accessed: 3rd Jan 2020]

“When I define communication, I think of a new grad who is proactive, direct, open, honest, thoughtful and it’s not just about what they say, it’s how they say it,” says Jennifer O’Leary, Faculty, Genetics Technology at The Michener Institute, Canada.⁵ Good communication skills include actively listening to others, processing feedback received, and reflecting on the feedback.

Surgeons are among those most resistant to acknowledging the need to brush up their speaking skills and a cause of concern for the Royal College of Surgeons (RCS), UK. According to Charles Collins, Chair of the Patient Liaison Groups at RCS, “Only around 25 per cent of a surgeon’s job requires technical expertise, even less in many specialties. The rest is about communicating with patients.”⁶ Surgeons need communication skills to discuss complicated procedures and help patients make informed choices.⁷

Patience is an essential soft skill for medical professionals. Whether guiding a patient and family through a challenging illness, or managing staff members during a period of heavy admissions, having patience can help decompress stress and enable more effective problem-solving.⁸

As medical professionals continually adopt new technologies to engage remotely with patients – as seen during the current coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic – there is an increasing reliance on soft skills. In light of COVID-19, the NHS has turned to remote consultations to minimise the risk of infection for staff and patients.⁹ Such consultations using live video conferencing highlight a

⁵ Ashley Rego. “Soft skills: Who says they can’t be taught?” *Canadian Journal of Medical Laboratory Science* 79:2 (2017):11

⁶ Jane Feinmann. “Brushing up on doctors' communication skills.” *The Lancet*. 360:9345 (2002)

⁷ Wendy Levinson, Pamela Hudak, Andrea C. Tricco. “A systematic review of surgeon–patient communication: Strengths and opportunities for improvement” *ScienceDirect* 93:1 (2013): 3-17

⁸ Bushardt, Reamer L. “Patience is still a virtue” *JAAPA (Journal of the American Academy of PAs)* 29:5 (2016): 13-14

⁹ British Medical Association (BMA) “COVID-19: video consultations and home working” (2021) <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/covid-19/adapting-to-covid/covid-19-video-consultations-and-homeworking> [Last Accessed: 3rd Jan 2020]

clinician's body language and facial expressions, enabling a patient to clearly understand the message being conveyed.¹⁰

To summarise, soft skills for medical professionals are more important than ever to deliver safe and effective patient care. An increasing dependency on technology and virtual interactions make it imperative for soft skills to be taught as part of medical and associated healthcare curricula globally.

¹⁰ P. Vermeir, D. Vandijck, S. Degroote, R. Peleman, R. Verhaeghe, E. Mortier, G. Hallaert, S. Van Daele, W. Buylaert, D. Vogelaers. "Communication in healthcare: a narrative review of the literature and practical recommendations" *IJCP (The International Journal of Clinical Practice)* (2015) <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/ijcp.12686> [Last Accessed: 3rd Jan 2020]

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