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► PATIENT RELATIONS

Boost health literacy through effective use of visual aids

The phrase, “A picture is worth 1,000 words,” carries special meaning in healthcare. Using visual aids with your patients can often save you words—and make those that you say more meaningful. For example, showing a patient a diagram of a heart helps you more efficiently and effectively explain how the organ works.

The act of showing patients—rather than just telling them—what you’re talking about can particularly help those with certain learning styles, says Helen Osborne,¹ MEd, OTR/L, a Natick, MA–based health literacy consultant. For example, visual learners benefit from seeing text, diagrams, or sketches, whereas auditory learners may prefer to have concepts explained to them verbally, she says. Kinesthetic learners use their sense of touch (e.g., by manipulating a model).

You likely see patients who fall into each of these categories, including some who learn best using a combination approach. Moreover, “patients’ learning needs and preferences can change depending on the situation or the subject,” Osborne says. Medical concerns can cause people stress that makes it difficult to

concentrate, so you do them a great service by making concepts easier to understand. When used well, visual aids can be powerful tools in boosting patients’ health literacy.

Incorporate visual education

You likely already use visual aids (e.g., posters on your wall or pamphlets in your office) in your practice, but you may not use them to their fullest potential. Instead of leaving it up to patients to read them, refer to them while you’re speaking to patients. “It’s another way of reinforcing information,” Osborne says.

Whether you purchase your visual materials or create them yourself, Osborne recommends that you keep the following tips in mind for the visual aids that you may use:

- **Make the message clear and simple.** Don’t have too much going on in a given handout, poster, Web page, etc., because it can distract readers. Although you want reasonably attractive materials, don’t let extra images (e.g., a decorative background or irrelevant details) obscure your message.

Your entire layout—not just the graphics—should be clean and easy to follow. Especially important for people with disabilities, make sure that colors contrast (e.g., dark ink on a light background) and fonts aren’t difficult to read. “A good design can make material inviting and easy to

read; not doing that well can do just the opposite,” Osborne says.

- **Keep graphics consistent with your message.** “If you’re writing about a serious topic, such as chemotherapy, you don’t want to have smiling, happy people all over the place like it’s nothing,” she says. Conversely, “you don’t need to be overly somber, but be respectful of the topic and respectful of the audience.”

- **Be sensitive.** Some people, especially those who have experienced war or violence, find graphics of disembodied body parts upsetting. Whenever possible, feature the whole body and highlight the region that you’re discussing. This also shows areas in more accurate proportion to the rest of the body.

- **Choose relevant illustrations.** Certain graphics may be outdated or confuse people from other cultures. For example, as mobile phones become more popular, the image of a phone cord may hold diminishing meaning for your patients.

- **Consider quality.** The quality of a photocopy is significantly worse than the quality of an original. Photocopied graphics can be difficult to see and may lose their value. Also, copying a color image to black and white may result in a mishmash of grays. Patients will likely not put the effort into deciphering unclear materials.

- **Obtain permission.** It’s against

¹ Osborne is president of Health Literacy Consulting (www.healthliteracy.com) and author of *Health Literacy from A to Z: Practical Ways to Communicate Your Health Message*. Contact her at 508/653-1199 or via e-mail at Helen@healthliteracy.com.

the law to reproduce/distribute copyrighted content. If you find an image on the Internet or in a textbook that you want to use, obtain the copyright holder's permission—and indicate on the copy that you reprinted the material with permission.

- **Be distinctive.** Beware of using the same images (e.g., clip art) as everyone else; try to make your materials stand out. “If you're doing a picture of an intestine, it probably doesn't have to be spectacularly yours,” Osborne says. “But if you're doing something that's really branding your practice, you want it to be unique.”

- **Include text.** Always combine simple text with the picture—don't rely on the picture alone to do the job. To enhance comprehension for different types of learners, add captions under photos, write out steps of procedures, etc.

- **Confirm understanding.** “No picture is going to work 100% of the time for all people,” she says. Even if you test your materials on a sample audience, as Osborne recommends, always confirm individual patients' understanding of the presented information by asking them to explain it back to you.

Explore artwork options

Explore your options for obtaining useful visuals. Osborne works with a professional illustrator when developing graphics for her books, articles, handouts, and Web site.

This approach allows her to make sure that she uses original materials branded to her company that meet her specifications exactly. Further, this allows her to not worry about copyright infringement because it's all her own material.

“The cost of an artist may be less than you expect,” Osborne says. For general artwork, consider contacting

a local art school because students may charge a lower rate than more established professionals. If your materials are on the clinical side, consider using a medical illustrator.

The Association of Medical Illustrators (www.ami.org) will likely have an artist in your area.

You can also purchase software that allows you to create custom materials in-house. One new product, the SmartDraw Healthcare Solution, is designed specifically for nonartists in the healthcare setting, says Dan Hoffman, SmartDraw's vice president of product development. “There is no learning curve,” he says.

The SmartDraw product includes a searchable library of healthcare

symbols and images—including textbook-quality Lippincott and Netter medical illustrations—and ready-made templates. Users simply click and drag to place images on the template and modify them. Practices can also add their own photos, logo, etc., to the template and then copy and paste their creations into Word, Excel, and PowerPoint documents.

As of press time, almost 1,000 people had purchased this product—a strong start considering that it launched on March 15 with little advertising, according to Todd Savit, SmartDraw's vice president of business development.

Go to www.smartdraw.com for a free trial or to learn more. ▲

Conduct interactive patient education using pictographs

Another powerful way in which you can incorporate visual aids into how you communicate with patients is by creating pictographs—simple line drawings that show an idea or action—while you explain ideas to patients. Simply sketch a condition, procedure, etc., while you're discussing it with a patient.

“It doesn't have to be gorgeous art, but it can really help someone understand what the whole problem is,” says Helen Osborne, a health literacy expert who conducts workshops to teach providers how to draw and use pictographs.

However, some structures may be too complicated for an impromptu drawing. For these situations, especially for specialists who explain certain problems repeatedly, create or purchase tear sheets that include only the basic anatomic structure. For example, an orthopedic surgeon may stock several copies of a knee tear sheet, perhaps resembling a coloring-book page, on which he or she can label pertinent components or show where the problem is (e.g., the location of a fracture).

As you speak with the patient, add words to your drawing or tear sheet to reinforce important points. For example, next to a fracture site, write how long you expect it to take to heal or briefly list care instructions. Then give the patient the pictograph to take home, Osborne says. It's also a good idea to put a copy in the patient's chart to document that you conducted patient education.

Osborne encourages physicians to offer their drawings in a lighthearted way by saying something such as, “I'm not the world's greatest artist, but let's see if I can show you what we're talking about.” Continue this dialogue to confirm whether the patient understands, she says.