INTEGRATING DISABILITY: COMMUNICATION AND HEALTH PROMOTION AS A PLATFORM FOR OVERCUMING DISPARITIES

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BACKGROUND:
Individuals with IDD are recognized as an underserved demographic that experience significant health disparities compared to the general population. In addition, they have more complex health conditions, have a greater need for healthcare services and utilize the healthcare system differently than patients without IDD. Due to these circumstances, disability has been found to be a risk factor for disenfranchisement and disappointment for encounters with healthcare providers. A strong doctor-patient relationship, along with effective and efficient doctor-patient communication can help improve health interactions for patients with IDD, ultimately helping to improve the healthcare disparities that they experience.

ISSUES:
Establishing a strong relationship with patients begins with communication. However, there are many barriers to effective communication between healthcare providers and their patients; communicating with patients with IDD presents its own unique challenges. Perspectives and communicative barriers can be looked at from both the provider and patient perspectives. Surprisingly, many of these barriers are shared by both groups. For instance, the following are seen as key barriers to communication by both physicians and their patients with IDD:

- **Time**: appointments for patients with IDD often take more time than other standard encounters. For physicians, they do not feel that they have enough time to adequately assess patients with IDD, feel that they do not have enough time to talk with their doctor, and have their questions answered.

- **Knowledge**: Many doctors state that they do not always feel comfortable caring for individuals with IDD, as they received little formal education on these topics during medical school and their graduate medical education training. For patients, and their family members, they often feel that physicians do not know as much about their specific diagnosis, and do not always value the knowledge and expertise that patients and their caregivers can offer.

- **Comfort**: Physicians often do not know how to best interact with and provide care to patients with IDD. Whether it is how to communicate with the use of assistive technology, adapting specific components of their physical exams or explaining their findings. Similarly, patients with IDD are not always sure of their role in their own healthcare, and may be unsure about how to best voice their questions and concerns.

Positions & Findings

Overcoming communication barriers is essential in establishing a productive provider-patient relationship. In an attempt to better understand and begin to address these barriers a literature review was conducted, pulling articles from several major databases. The information from these articles was used to develop three resources.

Two of these documents address doctor-patient communication, and are tailored specifically for their respective populations, physicians and patients with IDD. Each document lists potential barriers, as well as strategies for overcoming these barriers.

- **Time, knowledge and comfort were three potential barriers to effective communication between physicians and their patients with IDD.** History taking is an essential component of the medical encounter. For physicians, taking a history for patients with IDD can present additional challenges. In addition to differences in communication methods, physicians also have to ensure that they are collecting accurate information, and doing so in a timely manner. For patients, it can be difficult to know when to interrupt, what types of questions are appropriate, and what role they play in the healthcare encounter and their own health. In an effort to overcome these barriers, three documents have been developed to help strengthen the doctor-patient relationship, and communication, as well as expedite the history taking process.

- **How Do I Talk to my Doctor?** and the “Physician Fact Sheet” are fact sheets designed highlight specific aspects of the doctor-patient relationship, as well as how to develop more effective and efficient communication between physicians and patients. Each sheet was developed for the specific group (doctors or patients) and identified specific areas and topics in which they could help improve communication. For physicians, this addressed how to build rapport, how to adapt the physical exam, how to partner with patients with IDD when developing a treatment/management plan and more. For patients with IDD, it laid out specific ways they could prepare for, and be more involved, in their healthcare before, during, and after their appointments. Lastly, “My Health Report” is a history taking report that allows for the patient to complete the form on their own, prior to their appointment - allowing more time for them to talk to the physician, rather than answering questions. It also allows physicians to feel more confident in the accuracy of the information they collect, as well as ensure specific information important to caring for patients with disabilities that they may not usually ascertain from their other patients.

Discussion & Conclusions

The three documents described create a tripod for supporting doctor-patient communication, building provider-patient relationships, and enhancing physician-patient interactions. One is aimed to help bridge between providers and their patients with IDD. Each document was specifically tailored for the group that it was designed for. Creating, and assessing, health education and promotional tools, is essential in meeting the information relevant and concise, written at an appropriate level, formatted into a document that allows for the patient to complete the form on their own, and more. The three documents described create a tripod for supporting doctor-patient communication, building provider-patient relationships, and enhancing physician-patient interactions.

- **Tools like these will help us to create a healthier nation, and ensure the right to health for individuals with IDD.**

Backgroud & Issues

References


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