



by Laura Beaty, M.D.

There Are NO SILLY QUESTIONS When It Comes to Your Health

In most cases, a doctor's office visit is pressed into just 10 minutes of face-to-face time between a patient and a physician. Unfortunately, too many patients think of important questions after they leave the office, and getting those questions answered by phone can be a chore. While there are no studies that prove spending more time with patients will decrease medical errors, common sense tells me this must be the case. Communicating effectively requires spending time asking and answering important questions.

My patient called last week after her visit to double check the way she was to take her samples. Was it two pills once a day or one pill twice daily? I had told her the correct way, but failed to write it down. Another patient spent three days believing she had cancer because of a polyp found on her colonoscopy. I'm sure her specialist did not tell her this, but it is what she understood after receiving the phone call to discuss the results.

inform them I wanted the 399 charge removed before realizing that the charge was \$3.99 and not the \$399 that I believed.

Not only was I quite embarrassed by my mistake, but I had wasted an inordinate amount of time both on hold and searching the Internet for phone options. I'm certain the first representative was laughing at how cheap I sounded when I asked about prorating the 399 charge. How many people who can afford to travel to Europe need a four-dollar charge prorated?

This interaction reminded me that many times in the daily practice of medicine, what someone is told and what they understand are worlds apart. That may be because those of us doing the explaining are on a completely different thought level. Physicians have certainly been known to talk over the heads of their patients, but the opposite can be true as well. With issues we deal with every day, the result can be oversimplification (like the representative stating "399" without using the words "dollars" and "cents") or assuming someone understands when they don't (activating immediately).

It's often the questions that seem silly that could save us the most grief. For example, "Do you mean \$399.00?" would have seemed a silly question to her, but it would have saved me so much time and energy!

Building a worthwhile patient-physician relationship takes time and commitment from both parties. It is nice to have the luxury of time back on my side. I am spending all of the time necessary when I see each patient and make a point of taking phone calls to answer questions. Each patient has my cell phone number and email address in order to communicate all hours of the day, and any time I get a "silly" question, I remember: These are often the most important questions to answer.

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Miscommunication is certainly not exclusive to medicine. In preparation for a recent trip to Italy, I called my cellular service provider to add the international service to my phone. The representative activated the new feature immediately and advised me that my bill would reflect the added "399" amount. After ending the call I searched for cheaper options and decided that renting a phone would be more reasonable. I called back to