

Asking questions to stop making assumptions

The New Zealand Medical Journal - letter to the editor

My doctor has encouraged me to write to you because this is a case of all the medical profession assuming that a patient automatically understands what is meant by a non-medical phrase, and he has pleaded guilty too.

In June 2009 I had a radical prostatectomy and, afterwards, was told to do the pelvic floor exercises to reform and strengthen the muscles that control the bladder. However, even though I read all the literature provided and listened to the hospital specialists and nurses, never was it explained that the exercises did not have to be done while sitting on the floor but were actually a group of muscles at the base of the abdomen called "the pelvic floor". Only when I received a pamphlet from ACC in September 2010 was it explained clearly!

Consequently, I only did them intermittently because it was too painful when getting down to the floor. In June this year, because the incontinence had not stopped, I had a loop inserted. To sit at all for some weeks was painful so the exercises again were only done intermittently. Later I was given a rubber-ring cushion that women apparently use when they have just had babies, because they have similar problems as I have recently had.

Although now retired I am considered reasonably intelligent (two post-graduate degrees) but am single, and do not know about these things that seem to be common knowledge to women and the medical/nursing profession.

As prostate cancer is so common, and the government is combating it vigorously, it may help some other bachelor if the nurses ensure that he knows what is meant by the terms used. I have got used to the amusement this has occasioned amongst my retired nursing friends, so would ask you to publish this as it may help others in a similar position to myself.

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1. What assumptions were made in this case?
2. What was the impact of the assumptions?
3. What questions could health professionals have asked that would have checked these assumptions?
4. How many opportunities were there to check these assumptions?

(Speary, D. (2010). The New Zealand Medical Journal, 5 November 2010, Volume 123, Number 1325. Retrieved from <https://www.nzma.org.nz/journal/read-the-journal/all-issues/2010-2019/2010/vol-123-no-1325/letter-speary>)

Different SMS situations

Here are seven different SMS situations where people working in health could ask different questions.

Work out which questions relate to which SMS situation. The situations are:

1. Set a joint agenda
2. Find out what the person believes
3. Finding out how the person feels about making changes
4. Set goals
5. Solve problems
6. Check you have been clear
7. Follow up on goals

Look at the sets of questions on this page and the next page. Identify what each set of questions are trying to do and write the relevant situation from the seven situations listed above, next to each set of questions.

- What do you want to do?
 - When will you do it?
 - How often will you do it?
 - How important is it to you?
 - How confident do you feel about doing this?
 - Who/what can support you with this?
-

- How has it gone?
 - Tell me about ...
 - what went well
 - what is getting in the way.
 - What will make you more confident?
 - What have you done to reward yourself for your success?
 - What else can I do to support you?
-

- We have covered a lot today. I want to check I have been clear. Can you tell me the key points we have discussed?
 - To make sure I have explained things clearly, can you tell me what you will say to your family about your visit when you go home?
 - Can you show me how you will ...?
-


- What is good about ...
 - staying the same?
 - making change?
 - What worries do you have about ...
 - staying the same?
 - making change?
 - What is the worst thing that could happen?
 - What is your vision for the future?
-

- What would you like to cover today?
 - What would you like to know about?
 - What worries have you had since your last visit?
 - What else would you like to go over?
-

- What might help you to ...?
 - How else do you think you could handle it?
 - What ideas do you have?
 - What might you be overlooking?
 - What are the pros and cons of doing that?
 - How have you handled something like this before?
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- What do you think about ...?
 - What do you make of it?
 - How does your situation make you feel?
 - Tell me how you feel about ...
 - Different people react differently to finding out about ... How does it make you feel?
-

Question for different SMS situations

<p>Tip</p> <p>Start with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Tell me what you know about ... › How ...? › When ...? › Where ...? › What ...? › Describe ... 	<p>Set a joint agenda</p> <p>What would you like to cover today?</p> <p>What would you like to know about?</p> <p>What worries have you had since your last visit?</p> <p>What else would you like to go over?</p>	<p>Find out what the person believes</p> <p>What do you think about ...?</p> <p>What do you make of it?</p> <p>How does your situation make you feel?</p> <p>Tell me how you feel about ...</p> <p>Different people react differently to finding out about ... How does it make you feel?</p>
<p>Tip</p> <p>Ask yourself:</p> <p><i>Who is doing most of the talking in this conversation?</i></p> 	<p>Finding out how the person feels about making changes</p> <p>What is good about ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • staying the same? • making change? <p>What worries do you have about ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • staying the same? • making change? <p>What is the worst thing that could happen?</p> <p>What is your vision for the future?</p>	<p>Set goals</p> <p>What do you want to do?</p> <p>When will you do it?</p> <p>How often will you do it?</p> <p>How important is it to you?</p> <p>How confident do you feel about doing this?</p> <p>Who / what can support you with this?</p>

Solve problems

What might help you to ...?

How else do you think you could handle it?

What ideas do you have?

What might you be overlooking?

What are the pros and cons of doing that?

How have you handled something like this before?

Tip

Ask yourself:

Who else needs to be part of this conversation?



Check you have been clear

We have covered a lot today. I want to check I have been clear. Can you tell me the key points we have discussed?

To make sure I have explained things clearly, can you tell me what you will say to your family about your visit when you go home?

Can you show me how you will ...?

Tip

Remember, the argument for change comes from the person not from you.



Follow up on goals

How has it gone?

Tell me about ...

- what went well
- what is getting in the way.

What will make you more confident?

What have you done to reward yourself for your success?

What else can I do to support you?

Tip

Remember, pause and allow the person time to think.



Script of Shaun - video 2

Health Professional: So Shaun, tell me how are you feeling about your overall health at the moment?

Shaun: My overall health, I'm not feeling as great as I should be. I think I'm not having meals on time and I'm skipping a lot of meals during the day.

Health Professional: Okay. What meals are you skipping?

Shaun: Mostly it's breakfast and sometimes I would skip lunch too and just rely on dinner.

Health Professional: Okay sure. What would you ideally like to put in place around that do you think?

Shaun: I would like to put in place the timing of the meals I have. I think having breakfast on time, having lunch on time and having dinner on time as well because I'm having late night dinner which I'm pretty sure is not good for my health. And not having breakfast affects me through the day.

Health Professional: Okay. What's getting in the way, what's stopping you from having regular meals?

Shaun: What's stopping me is my work schedule. My shift work which stops me. Like sometimes doing early shift, sometimes doing late shift and sometimes doing double shifts. Totally gets me out of that, now reminds me when I eat and when I'm not gonna eat.

Health Professional: Sure. What do you think maybe you could change to put something in place to be able to fit in breakfast and lunch?

Shaun: I think I should, like, start putting reminders in my phone or something like that that keeps on reminding me when to have breakfast, when to have lunch. And start to put more importance into it and take some time out of work to get my breakfast and lunch on time.

Health Professional: How much of a priority is it for you?

Shaun: It is a big priority. I want to be a healthy person and it is a big priority for me.

Health Professional: Okay. How confident are you that that would work using a timer or reminder system on your phone?

Shaun: I'm pretty confident. It's just up to me and finding that motivation to keep on doing it. It's really important. I think if I try to do that, I can do it.

Health Professional: Okay, sure. What might you need to put in place to actually fit in the meals once you've got your timer on your phone? Is there anything you'd need to do to put in place actually having the meals?

Shaun: Yeah, I think for the breakfast I have to make sure that I'm having a proper breakfast because mostly I would eat carbs for lunch and for breakfast as well I'll rely on muesli or something. So I should eat health food or something and for lunch I have to have a proper balanced meal with protein, carbs and vegetables.

Health Professional: Okay, well that sounds good.

Shaun: Yeah, thank you.