Activating the Patient

A sea of forty pairs of inquisitive, curious gazes slowly glided their attention across the room to the young physician who stood before them. With a deep breath, I confidently proclaimed good morning as I greeted the expectant mothers. A hopeful energy echoed with every word as they sought out to demystify tales from the Internet and to reassure themselves of the health of their pregnancy. Questions ranged from birth control to dieting and exercise in pregnancy. As I carefully dissected each question, I began to realize how much of their inquisition was a reflection of their fifteen minute encounter with us, their providers. For as the afternoon grew to a close, the confidence and new information they now possessed provided them with a means to avoid the missteps they naturally encountered in their world.

Fifteen minutes or nine hundred seconds seems like a sufficient amount of time to ensure that all is well with your patient. However what we fail to realize is that finite time frame is merely a snapshot of the totality of one's existence at that point in time. Once your patient leaves the confines of the examination room, she is left to her own devices, namely the overwhelming volume of information on the world wide web and the uninformed public.

Our visits with patients, albeit prenatal or health screens, provide a prime moment for us to educate them. It is through this exchange of knowledge that we stand to empower patients to become advocates of their own health. Have you ever met that patient who presented to your labor and delivery floor who passionately discloses that she plans on breastfeeding given her awareness of the benefits when compared to formula feeding? Her conviction is unwavering as she has become an active participant in her own health. To know that you have the power to direct the fate of your health stems from the degree through which that belief is indoctrinated and cultivated from within. Our role as physicians therefore becomes, not only ones who heal, but ones who activate.

The word advocacy suggests some type of action that at times may seem intimidating given how burdensome patient care can be; however, that very essence of doing something comes in many different forms both inside and outside of the clinic. Something as simple as providing a patient friendly worksheet on a medical topic discussed during her visit to be revisited at a follow up appointment is a simple gesture. It transforms the patient-physician relationship from one dominated by monologue to that of dialogue where concerns and ideas can be shared in a manner served to inform. On the other extreme, utilizing your professional status to influence policy on a government level also helps destroy barriers and streamline care for your patients.

Despite the spectrum of involvement, we owe it to our patients to be advocates both in and outside of the clinic. Being aware of the latest advances in care and legislation allows us to accurately direct our patients to resources they need to optimize their care. Furthermore, it serves as an opportunity to learn of ways in which our patient’s care might be compromised outside of the clinic despite our recommendations and education. This degree of awareness only makes patient care more comprehensive.

Advocacy has the ability to improve patient care, strengthen the therapeutic relationship between physicians and patients and inspire patient attitudes towards a healthier self.