The Handshake and Hello Technique

Start every consultation by giving whoever you are seeing a firm handshake and/or a hug and say ‘hello’. This is important for a number of reasons. It helps you to connect with each other from the start — and eye contact, body language and tone of voice are all very revealing. Often, doctors are typing up the previous patient’s notes when you enter. By putting your hand out and waiting until it’s shaken, you can get to know each other and focus on you. Some NHS staff will always shake your hand, smile and introduce themselves, but not all do. So it’s good if you take the initiative. It makes the consultation a meeting of experts from the outset — you’re an expert in your illness and how you live your day, your doctor is an expert in trying to improve your life.

Many mobile phones have a recording facility, and your GP or consultant shouldn’t mind if you record a consultation for personal use and to inform your carers. Some patients say it helps to listen back, away from the stress of the medical setting. Also, most people forget much of what was said in a consultation. You can take a friend in too. It may also be useful to make notes while you’re in your consultation to refer back to.

Asking the Most Difficult Questions

These are the kind of questions you should ask any person treating you for a serious, life-threatening or life-limiting disease:

- Are you a specialist for this particular condition?
- What are the pros and cons of each option for me?
- What are your (personal or your team’s) outcome figures for each of the treatment options? (How do they compare with the NHS average?)
- Can I meet the key Specialist team in the NHS with members different from you, or who can offer me options you’re not able to?

For any treatment, you need the name of someone — for example, a senior doctor or nurse — who is ultimately accountable for your care, agrees with your goals and is your ‘go-to’ person for serious concerns.

If you get access to a specialist nurse, it helps you to connect with the quality of your care. They give you knowledge, skills, confidence, courage, kindness and laughter.

It’s no coincidence that when the NHS has failed badly, often in the care of the most vulnerable or elderly patients, a recurring theme is that there were not enough specialist nurses to provide safe care to patients with very complex needs.

To find services patients rate highly, visit hospitalnurse.org.uk or patientcommission.org.uk. To read inspection reports, visit cqc.org.uk.

Know What You’re Entitled To

Every illness has more than one treatment option, so it’s likely if you understand what should be happening to you and the standard of care you should be getting.

For every medical and physical illness, and for social care, there are agreed standards of care you should be getting, and clear information for patients and carers on the NHS Choices website (click on the menu at the top right that says ‘Standards and Indicators’). Once you know what care you should be getting, you can figure out how much you can do for yourself and what you need help with.

Ask if you can have someone report back to you. Patients with very complex needs. For any treatment, you need the name of someone — for example, a senior doctor or nurse — who is ultimately accountable for your care, agrees with your goals and is your ‘go-to’ person for serious concerns.

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