



# Healing Words

## *The power of apology in medicine*

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It is time physicians and health care organizations recognize the importance of authenticity, honesty, transparency and effective communication in delivering care and maintaining the provider-patient relationship. It is important when establishing the relationship and critical when unexpected things happen.

There is near universal agreement among risk managers in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Europe that up to 80% of malpractice claims are attributed to failures in communication and/or a lack of interpersonal skills, usually of the physician. In 2007, The Joint Commission documented that communication breakdown was the root cause of more than 65% of medical errors. In over 4400 reports, 71% were patient death and 10% permanent loss of function. The Joint Commission has noted that, "Physicians are most often sued, not for bad care, but inept communication" (2005). Health care providers have a way to directly and immediately correct the problem - by focusing on their relationship with coworkers, patients and families, and by increasing effective, respectful, and transparent communication.

When complications occur, physicians should apologize, offer ongoing care and support, and fully disclose all details to the patient. They should never breach the patient's trust and engage in the kind of cover-ups that have become all too common in health care today.

The beauty of apology and disclosure is that by doing the right thing, individuals and organizations reap many positive unintended consequences - things that naturally ensue - such as enhanced communications effectiveness, improved staff relationships, lower liability because of enhanced provider-patient relationships, and increased patient safety.

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## **On-Line Learning Courseware**

### **Lesson 1: Effective Apology and Truth-telling (Disclosure)**

#### **Learning Objectives**

After completing this lesson, the learner will be able to:

- Define the rationale for apology and disclosure as it relates to the provider-patient relationship
- Explain the motivations for apology related to instances of unexpected outcomes in medicine
- Recognize roadblocks to apology in the healthcare setting and offer mitigating strategies
- Describe several indicators that signal the need for an apology by a healthcare provider
- Describe the five Rs of apology and how they each affect the provider-patient relationship
- Create an effective apology given a scenario of unexpected outcomes in medicine
- Select the appropriate level of transparency for a given scenario of unexpected outcomes in medicine

### **Lesson 2: Fostering Authentic Relationships with Patients**

#### **Learning Objectives**

After completing this lesson, the learner will be able to:

- List several clues to a patient's health literacy level
- Identify verbal and non-verbal communication factors and how use them effectively in building patient confidence
- Cite three clues that signal difficulty in a provider-patient relationship
- Explain the key components of authentic speaking as it relates to provider-patient interactions
- Explain the key components of authentic listening as it relates to the healthcare setting

### **Lesson 3: Building a Culture of Civility**

#### **Learning Objectives**

After completing this lesson, the learner will be able to:

- Explain the relationship between civility and quality in patient care
- Describe the six principles of civility and how they relate to healthcare providers
- Cite three social and personal benefits of civility in the healthcare setting, and articulate a business rationale for each