



# Healing Words

## *The power of apology in medicine*

**Content Expert: Dr. Michael Woods**

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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

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## **About the Author**



Dr. Michael Woods - leadership expert, surgeon, author of *In a Blink*, *Healing Words* and *The DEPO Principle* and editor of *Cultural Sensitivity for Healthcare Providers* - is known for his work related to the power of apology and truth-telling in the aftermath of health care errors. Woods is a recognized authority and frequently invited speaker on provider-patient communication and relationships, patient satisfaction, and strategies to reduce medical malpractice.

Dr. Woods founded Civility Mutual® Educational Services, an organization dedicated to helping physicians and healthcare staff improve patient-provider communications, and thus raise the bar on health care quality, outcome, and patient safety. The business plan for Civility Mutual was

runner-up at USC's Lloyd Greif Center for Entrepreneurial Studies, which was ranked number one in US Graduate Business Schools for Entrepreneurship by Entrepreneur Magazine in 2008.

Dr. Woods has an active speaking career; his clients include the Joint Commission, Department of Defense, U.S. Army Medical Command, American Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery, and the New York Northern Metropolitan Hospital Association.

Dr. Woods is Chief Medical Officer and a practicing surgeon at Monadnock Community Hospital in Peterborough, NH. In previous work at CHRISTUS St. Vincent Medical Center in Santa Fe, NM, he designed and implemented an internet-based hand-off communication tool in accordance with The Joint Commission's 2007 National Patient Safety Goals, developed a comprehensive hospital-wide Leadership and Service Excellence educational and training program, and spearheaded the revision of the hospital's informed consent process.

Dr. Woods holds a Masters of Medical Management from the University of Southern California, is a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons, a Member of the American College of Physician Executives, and a member of the Communications Advisory Panel of the Joint Commission's International Patient Safety Center.

Dr. Woods is Board Certified by the American Board of Surgery, and is a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons and a Member of the American College of Physician Executives.