Informing Health Clinicians to Improve Health Literacy and Communication with their South Asian Patients

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The Leadership Scholars Certificate Program is a two-year selective, interdisciplinary certificate program that prepares Rutgers undergraduate women to be informed, innovative, and socially responsible leaders.

Leadership Scholars design and implement social action projects to expand their understanding of issues and problems and to develop leadership skills.

This project gives Scholars the opportunity to apply the theoretical knowledge they have gained about leadership, advocacy, and social change with the practical and experiential knowledge they have developed about a particular policy issue or problem through the field site placement. It also further develops leadership skills by giving undergraduates the opportunity to practice leadership through action.

To find out more please visit the Institute for Women’s Leadership’s website at http://iwl.rutgers.edu.
Foundation

- Internship at the Eric B. Chandler Health Center
  - Social Services Department

- Insights and Discussions with supervisors about health literacy and language barriers for their New Brunswick population
Project

- Initial Stage: Research on health topics important and necessary to South Asian communities

- Second Stage: Meetings with Doctors to understand how they manage health literacy with their patients

- Third Stage: Workshop to inform clinicians about the health topics important to people of south asian background
Biggest Insights

Five Health Topics Important to those of South Asian Background

1. Diet
2. Family Decision Making
3. Importance of Healthcare Screening/Preventative Care
4. Holistic Approach vs. Western Medicine
5. Expectations of Health Visits
Diet

- Diet is explained as not just food, but an identity. Food defines culture and social dynamics as well as role identities such as a caretaker or a group member.

- The Indian body is biologically different from the American body such as things like metabolism, but it’s not considered different in terms of treatment and biomedicine.

**Doctors’ Advice:** Ask about their appetite, 24-hour diet, “is this what you eat on average?” refer to nutritionist.
Family Decision Making

South Asian families make health decisions more collectively than individually, therefore shame and saving face can sometimes be more important than seeking healthcare, especially for certain diseases such as HIV/AIDS. Although those of Asian and Pacific Islanders background in the United States had a lower percentage of AIDS cases, they were less likely to be treated of HIV infection compared to other groups due to lack of awareness or unwillingness to get treatment.

Response: According to the paper, ‘Impact of Culture on Healthcare Seeking Behavior of Asian Indians,” it is suggested that disclosure paperwork should accommodate for families or based on any religious beliefs.

Doctor’s Advice: Accommodate with family, parents, etc. Explain to them what is going on. Guarantee complete confidentiality.
Screening/Preventative Care

Cervical cancer screening and Pap smear follow-ups are important to prevent cervical cancer. There is also the lack of understanding and skepticism of the benefits of healthcare and screening. They are not aware of preventative care. They might also feel shy or modest to do a pap smear or cervical cancer screening.

Doctor’s Advice: Educate them about the importance of preventative care and why taking the initial step can be life-altering at the end. For cervical cancer screening, primary doctors should make sure their patients seek out preventative care by visiting the OB/GYN and having annual gynecological check-ups. Ask for their comfort levels and provide a same-gender physician.
Holistic vs. Western Medicine

Some South Asian groups also try to reject Western forms of medical care and might also seek other natural or holistic/traditional methods that can also prolong health treatment needs. This can be based on cultural and/or religious practices.

Doctors’ Response: “One is not right, one is not wrong.” It might not be safe to mix the traditional medicines with the medications provided by the healthcare provider. Suggestion is to really respect the patient’s choices and decisions and try both ways. Then the clinician can recheck to see if the individual is doing better. The most important thing is to make the patient feel comfortable.
Expectations

For any patient, especially those of immigrant background might have different expectations of what they will be getting out of a doctor’s visit such as instant gratification.

Doctors’ Response: Always go over what they will be expecting out of the appointment and what they were expecting. Then proceed to explain to them and show them exactly what they will be doing. For example for a gynecological visit. Some patients might not answer about any of their expectations, so it is important to show them exactly what will be happening before doing anything. The question still arises is how to manage the instant gratification that some patients might expect.
Leadership Lessons

- Life happens; must change plans
- But I am still in charge, no one can stop me
- Creativity
- Breathe


