

# Understanding Patient Complaints in Healthcare

Reading time:

Pamela Ferrada

Date created: 14/03/2024

Tags: [Medico-Legal](#) | [Medical Practitioner](#) | [General Surgery](#) | [Complaints and Adverse Events](#)

During any given workday, you most certainly will have several encounters, meetings and interactions with patients and their families. It has been cited that a lack of time in these interactions can sometimes be an obstacle to developing caring therapeutic relationships, as they require high level and well-developed communication between patients and healthcare practitioners .

Demanding healthcare encounters can provoke unnecessary anxiety in those involved and reduce public's confidence in the healthcare system. In addition, differences in communication styles and objectives, needs and expectations related to these encounters can further impact the quality of a doctor-patient interaction.

The area of concern from a medico-legal and risk management perspective, is that most patient-reported complaints relate communication and interactions with healthcare practitioners. Therefore, highly effective communication between parties and inclusion in decision-making is crucial in increasing a patient's satisfaction during a healthcare encounter

## The root causes of a complaint

Research<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> shows that a patient's reported complaint can include recurrent descriptions of suboptimal experiences, such as:

- Insufficient or lack of respect and empathy.
- Not being approached in a professional manner generating feelings of not being valued as a person and therefore, affecting their sense of dignity.
- Feeling disregarded and rushed by the healthcare professional.
- Feeling dissatisfaction and a lack of resolution for multiple health issues.
- Perceived neglect, rudeness, or insensitive treatment from the healthcare practitioner.
- Poor or inadequate doctor-patient communication.
- Lack of comprehension of the medical information given.
- Perceived nonchalant treatment.
- The patient's need for justice

## Regulatory considerations

### Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) & National Boards Code of Conduct

#### 4.3 Effective communication

Effective communication is an important part of the doctor-patient relationship. It involves:

4.3.1 Listening to patients, asking for and respecting their views about their health, and responding to their concerns and preferences.

4.3.2 Encouraging patients to tell you about their condition and how they are currently managing it, including any other health advice they have received, any prescriptions or other medication they have been prescribed and any other conventional, complementary, or alternative therapies they are using.

4.3.3 Informing patients of the nature of, and need for, all aspects of their clinical management, including examination and investigations, and giving them adequate opportunity to question or refuse intervention and treatment.

4.3.4 Discussing with patients their condition and the available management options, including their potential benefit and harm and material risks.

4.3.5 Endeavouring to confirm that your patient understands what you have said.

4.3.6 Responding to patients' questions and keeping them informed about their clinical progress.

4.3.7 Taking all practical steps to ensure that arrangements are made to meet patients' specific language, cultural and communication needs, and being aware of how these needs affect patients' understanding.

4.3.8 Familiarising yourself with, and using whenever necessary, qualified language interpreters to help you to meet patients' communication needs. Government-funded and fee-for-service interpreter services are available.

## Professional considerations

### RACGP Criterion C1.3 Informed patient decisions

Patients have the right to make informed decisions about their health, medical treatments, referrals and procedures. As a healthcare practitioner, you have a duty to provide information that the patient can understand and that is tailored to their individual needs.

### RACGP Criterion C2.1 Respectful and culturally appropriate care

The ideal patient-practitioner partnership is a collaboration based on mutual respect and mutual responsibility for the patient's health. The duty of care includes clearly explaining the benefits and potential harm of specific medical treatments and the consequences of not following a recommended management plan.

## MIPS' Medico-legal key advice tips

- Provide comprehensive information and explanations that will help form a coherent understanding regarding what is happening with their health.
- Facilitate the patients' autonomy, integrity and participation in their care by keeping them informed about their health conditions and available treatments.
- Ensure continuity in care and open collaboration between relevant healthcare providers.
- Protect and respect the patients' dignity; be mindful of the imbalance of power and a patient's vulnerability during appointments
- Follow your organisation's communication protocols and strategies to handle patients' complaints
- Maintain contemporaneous and comprehensive notes and health records.
- Always contact MIPS in the event of adverse or unexpected patient outcome, complaint, claim or investigation concerning your healthcare.

<sup>1</sup>Warnecke, E. (2014). The art of communication. *Australian Family Physician*. 43:3 156 – 158.

<sup>2</sup>Skär, L., & Söderberg, S. (2018). Patients' complaints regarding healthcare encounters and communication. *Nursing open*, 5(2), 224-232.

<sup>3</sup>Bano, U., Ahmed, A., & Tassadaq, N. (2021). Medical professionalism: comparing views of public and doctors. *PAFMJ*, 71(2), 584-87.

<sup>4</sup>Abdelrahman, W., & Abdelmageed, A. (2017). Understanding patient complaints. *BMJ: British Medical Journal*, 356

Any queries, [contact MIPS](#)

This information is not intended to be legal advice and as such should not be relied on as a substitute. You may need to consider seeking legal or other professional advice about your individual circumstances as appropriate. Should you wish to obtain further information you can review our Member Handbook Combined PDS and FSG or contact MIPS on 1800 061 113. You may need to consider seeking legal or other professional advice about your individual circumstances as appropriate. Information is current as at the date published.

## Additional resources

### Articles

- [Managing complaints | MIPS](#)
- [Handling Complaints – the Dos and Don'ts | MIPS](#)
- [Practising under adversity - claims, complaints | MIPS](#)
- [I've had a complaint or adverse event | MIPS](#)
- [Have you been involved in an adverse outcome | MIPS](#)

# Webinars

- [The Evolution of a Medical Complaint | MIPS](#)
  - [The Evolution of a Dental Complaint | MIPS](#)
  - [Practising under adversity - claims, complaints & investigations](#)
  - [Dental - Saying No and Managing Complaints | MIPS](#)
-