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You are sitting in a sterile exam room, waiting for a skin check to determine if the mole you're worried about is cancerous. The room is cold, and you've been asked to take off your clothes and sit on the table. This is your first skin check, and you have no idea what is going to happen.

For many patients, the anxiety of not knowing what to expect can be as distressing as any procedure. Clear communication is a critical part of care and can transform patient anxiety into trust. Understanding and continuously improving how you communicate with your patients is a necessity.

Effective communication during physical examinations is a crucial aspect of patient care. It helps clarify the process, manages patient expectations and can reduce anxiety. Patients need to know what to expect during the examination, including any physical sensations they might experience and the overall duration.

Informed consent isn't just a legal formality, it is an important aspect of providing quality medical care. When it comes to skin exams, informed consent includes explaining what the examination will involve, what you're looking for, and why it's necessary. Patients should feel informed and confident that they understand the process.

Despite the importance of informed consent and clear communication, we receive around 300 complaints each year relating to communication concerns. These complaints often cite issues such as dismissive behaviour from doctors or unclear communication.

For instance:

- One patient noted, “The doctor told me they were too busy to spend time reading my file so we should just get right to the check.”
- Another patient said, “She didn’t ask me why I was there, just seemed to want to rush through the exam and get rid of me”
- A third patient shared, “The doctor didn’t explain the procedure or what to expect, I was really stressed.”

These examples highlight the need for medical professionals to listen to patient concerns, communicate clearly and get informed consent.

Communicating consent

To gain a deeper understanding of effective communication in skin exams, we spoke with Dr David Wong, an experienced dermatologist, Fellow of the Australasian College of Dermatologists and Medical Council hearing member.

Clear communication during skin checks is essential for building trust and ensuring patient satisfaction. By clearly explaining the process and listening to your patients, you can improve their experience. As Dr Wong aptly puts it, “Good communication is essential to better patient care.”

He emphasises the importance of clear and respectful communication. “When patients come in for a skin check, they typically know that they will need to disrobe for the examination.” However, he emphasises the importance of communicating that clearly and respects people’s privacy and modesty. “I always begin by letting patients know what to expect.”

Dr Wong prefers verbal consent for skin examinations over paperwork, but he still makes sure his patients understand what will be required before starting the examination. “I believe verbal consent is sufficient in this setting. Patients come for a skin check with the understanding that I need to examine their skin.”

Dr Wong points out that patients may feel uncomfortable during a skin exam, “It’s reassuring for patients to have some level of coverage during the examination. While some patients are comfortable disrobing fully, I leave that decision to them.”

In cases where a sample or invasive procedure is needed, Dr Wong explains the importance of transparency.

“If I need to take a sample or perform an invasive procedure, I explain what I suspect and discuss treatment options. We can trial a treatment and schedule a follow-up, if necessary, before performing an invasive procedure.”

Handling sensitive areas

Respecting patient privacy and touching a patient’s sensitive areas with care is crucial. Dr Wong notes, “For sensitive areas, I won’t examine them unless specifically asked. If a patient wants me to examine their groin or genital area, I always offer to have a nurse present if they prefer. In my experience most patients decline, but I always give them the option.”

Additionally, Dr Wong explains what he will do during the entire examination, so patients fully understand and are aware of each step involved beforehand. “When I’m examining a female patient, I explain that I’ll need to move the bra strap to inspect the skin, and I make sure to pull it towards the middle, not to the side. I ask them to turn around and inform them I’ll be pulling the strap again. Once I’ve completed the examination of their top half, I ask them to put their top on and then remove their bottoms and I always ask them to keep their underwear on.”

This approach means the patient is informed at each stage of the exam and can voice any concerns, ask questions or withdraw consent if they choose.

Encouraging patient concerns

Dr Wong underscores the importance of encouraging patients to voice their concerns. “Before I start, I always ask, are there any spots or things you’re concerned about? You live with your skin, I don’t. You know, and you need to let me know. I’ll check everything but I’ll specifically check the spots you’ve mentioned.”

He notes that patients might worry about spots that turn out to be benign, and in these cases, clear and careful communication is important. “Usually, the spot a patient is worried about turns out to be nothing significant, but it’s still important to explain to the patient what their condition is and give them the opportunity to ask questions.”

Addressing cosmetic concerns

When dealing with cosmetic concerns, Dr Wong stresses the importance of providing a clear rationale for any procedure. “For cosmetically sensitive areas, it’s important to provide a reasonable explanation for any removal or treatment. If a removed spot turns out to be benign, patients may question the decision, so explaining the decision is really important.”

Using modern tools to communicate

To further support patient comprehension, Dr Wong utilises visual aids during consultations. “I often use Google to show patients images of their condition. By showing them pictures, I can provide the exact name of the condition and any additional information,” Dr Wong explains. This approach helps patients visually connect with their concerns and better understand their skin issues.

Key takeaways and resources

Open and clear communication is essential in providing quality healthcare. Informed consent during a physical examination like a skin exam is not static, but an ongoing, dynamic process of advising patients what you’re doing, why you’re doing it, and confirming they are happy to proceed. If you’re interested in exploring this topic further, we have listed some useful resources below.

- Medical Board of Australia’s [***Good Medical Practice: a code of conduct for doctors in Australia***](#)
- Articles from RACGP
 - [**Art of communication**](#)
 - [**Informed consent**](#)
 - [**Skin checks**](#)