

Turning frustration into fulfillment.

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Turning Frustration Into Fulfillment

When we invite our patients to be part of the solution, even difficult encounters can become rewarding.

Sweetie Jain, MD

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As family physicians, we spend a significant amount of time and energy each day dealing with frustrations. Even the sacred doctor-patient visit is not immune, as we often face communication challenges, cultural or social barriers, interpersonal conflicts, and clinical uncertainty in these interactions. While it is easy to pull away from our patients during uneasy encounters, I've found that the best approach is to involve them.

Case in point

A few years ago, after feeling frustrated by my inability to communicate with growing numbers of Hispanic patients in my practice, I decided to take a proactive and creative approach: I asked my patients to teach me Spanish.

I started by asking my patients to bring in four Spanish-language words related to medicine (body parts, symptoms, etc.) at each visit. As soon as I made the suggestion, I could see that it gave them a sense of empowerment and fulfillment. At the same time, I asked that they try to learn English in the same way that I was trying to learn Spanish.

My best teachers have been my pediatric patients, who never fail in assigning tasks to me. They feel extremely happy to teach their doctor, and we build a great patient-doctor relationship this way. I have had several children actually mail me my Spanish "homework." Finding these assignments in my mailbox in envelopes addressed by my pediatric patients is an immensely joyful experience. I still possess one of my homework assignments from an 11-year-old patient, who wrote:

Dear Dr. Jain,

This is for you to learn.

How is your family doing?

¿Cómo estas tu familia?

How are you feeling?

¿Cómo te sientes?

Do you feel something else?

¿Te sientes algo más?

Another patient, a 7-year-old boy, gave me several Spanish words to practice: arm – *brazo*, fingers – *dedos*, ear – *oreja* and lips – *labios*. He even checked on my vocabulary at his next visit.

Lessons learned

While I am not yet fluent in Spanish, I have picked up enough words and phrases to improve my communication with these patients. More than that, though, this experience has added to my joy of practicing medicine. Instead of feeling frustrated at these encounters, I now enjoy them and feel eager to learn from my patients. In return, many of my patients have become more compliant and sincere in their attempts to follow my medical advice, whether it be taking medicines regularly or getting tests done on time.

There are so many benefits to this simple strategy that I would encourage all family physicians who treat Spanish-speaking patients (or patients who speak any language other than their own) to consider it. To take it a step further, all physicians in a group or all residents in a program could come together and share what they've learned from their patients.

This experience has taught me that when we involve our patients, we can turn many of our frustrations into treasures. These moments are some of the hidden joys of practicing family medicine. Exploring these joys – and sharing them with our colleagues, residents and students – could go a long way toward re-energizing our profession.

About the Author

Dr. Jain is an attending physician and faculty member at the Sacred Heart Family Practice Residency Program in Allentown, Pa. Author disclosure: nothing to disclose.

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