

AAP National Conference: Using improvisational techniques can improve communication with families

October 24, 2016

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Article type: [AAP National Conference & Exhibition](#)

Topics: [Interpersonal & Communication Skills](#)

When you see your 20th patient of the day with fever and sore throat, your conversations can start to sound a little scripted. You explain your diagnosis and treatment plan and then ask the parents if they have any questions, all while typing information into the electronic health record.

You may have provided the medical care the child needed, but did you address the family's concerns and connect with them? Was there a true give and take?

A new model to improve the way physicians communicate with families will be introduced during an Interactive Group Forum titled "'Improv' Your Practice: Out of the Box Communication Tools to Enhance Clinical Interactions (I3150)." Called medical improvisation, the model draws on techniques used by improvisational actors — active observation, listening and quick thinking.

The session will be held from 4-5:30 p.m. Monday in Room 120 of Moscone North. Faculty include Donald Shifrin, M.D., FAAP, a member of the AAP Council on Communications and Media, and Belinda Fu, M.D., clinical assistant professor, University of Washington Department of Family Medicine. Dr. Fu also is a professional actor and a pioneer in the field of medical improv.

"I took one of her courses at University of Washington for three hours and was totally fascinated by the process," said Dr. Shifrin, clinical professor of pediatrics at the University of Washington School of Medicine.

Though the techniques taught are used by improv actors, the goal of medical improv is not to turn doctors into comedians. Rather, it aims to make communication more active and spontaneous and improve empathy and teamwork.

The workshops include a series of fun, easy and casual exercises designed to keep communication flowing. To do that, Dr. Fu encourages participants to be themselves and try to make their partner look good by keeping the conversation going, Dr. Shifrin said. She also advises them to be flexible, take some risks and be vulnerable since they don't know what's coming next.

In many ways, that's what happens when a doctor knocks on the exam room door.

"As I always like to say, our clinical interactions with patients are somewhat like Forrest Gump's box of chocolates. You never know what you're going to get," Dr. Shifrin said.

Surprisingly, many of the physicians who attended the workshop with Dr. Shifrin said they were introverted and wanted to see if they could learn to be more spontaneous and in the moment when talking with patients, other doctors and in their private life, he said.

Those attending Monday's sessions can expect to participate in some classic improvisation training exercises designed to demonstrate how improv can add value to their communication skill set.

"We're going to raise your awareness level of where you are when you open that door and what you are trying to accomplish when you go in that room," Dr. Shifrin said.

He also is looking forward to having Dr. Fu, one of the top medical improv experts in the country, lead the session with him.

“It will be exciting for us to listen and learn from the guru,” Dr. Shifrin said.

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