



COMMUNICATION

Review and Commentary: A Practical Guide to Communication Skills in Clinical Practice

A Set of Four CD-ROMs,¹ distributed by Medical AudioVisual Communications, Inc.

R. BUCKMAN, B. KORSCH & W. BAILE (1998)

Website: <http://www.mavc.com>; E-mail: dwc@mavc.com
(800) 757-4868; (905) 602-1160

Price for set: Canadian \$175.00.

Also available as five videotapes, at \$59.00 each, or \$239.00 for the set (in Canadian funds)

NOTE: The following report is based on a review of the CD-ROM set, not the videotapes

Communication Is Vital but Insufficiently Taught

The ability to communicate effectively with patients is fundamental for clinicians to be optimally helpful (Meryn, 1998; Ong *et al.*, 1995). Without refined communication skills, clinicians are at risk of trying to make management recommendations on the basis of incomplete or inaccurate information, and they can fail to provide their patients with the guidance, support, or understandings they need.

Yet, few health professions education programs provide sufficient time for the systematic learning and reinforcement of the complex skills needed for establishing trust-based relationships, for gathering full and accurate information, for conveying information successfully, or for dealing with the many difficulties that can arise in the context of illness and stress. And in too many programs there are other problems. Whatever systematic teaching of communication skills is offered is often done in the early years of clinical education with little

Editor's note: *This article is a "first" for our journal, presenting a review of one of the newer non-print educational resources. We judge this particular resource to be of such high potential value, in an area we regard as so fundamentally important, that we decided to make this presentation considerably more elaborate than our typical book reviews. We invite your comments on the value to you of such reviews and commentaries, and ask your recommendations of other non-print resources for future reviews.*

reinforcement later. Much of what comes later tends to be repeated exposure to supervising clinicians who themselves were poorly prepared as communicators. All too often these supervisors serve, inadvertently, as negative role models.

Systematic approaches to providing medical students with instruction in communication and relationship skills are relatively new. Such helpful resources as simulated patients for practice and videotaping for feedback and analysis began barely three decades ago (Jason *et al.*, 1971; Kahn *et al.*, 1979). Although there has been wider use of such resources in recent decades, few schools have sufficient numbers of experts in these techniques to provide their learners with adequate opportunities for learning fundamental communication capabilities.

Technology Can Help

Now that many schools of the health professions (including schools in the developing world; see e.g. Bose & Jayawickramarajah, 2000) have computers, and given that most of the newer computers are equipped with CD-ROM drives, this technology can become a vehicle for widely disseminating educational materials. High quality materials can enable schools that are short of adequately prepared faculty to offer instruction that would otherwise be beyond their reach. The set of four CD-ROMs reviewed here can be of substantial help to many programs and provides an indication of what will be possible as this technology continues to mature.

The producers of this set describe it as “a comprehensive guide to communication skills, with over forty videotaped scenarios showing how communication techniques can improve patient care and support.” The content is presented in eight sections, of varying lengths, titled: ‘I. The Basics’; ‘II. Dealing with Feelings’ (e.g. anger, despair, denial and depression); ‘III. Uncovering the Hidden Problem’ (e.g. anorexia, physical abuse by a spouse); ‘IV. Breaking Bad News’; ‘V. Special or Difficult Situations’ (such as the diagnosis of Alzheimer’s and AIDS, and managing cultural and ethnic difficulties); ‘VI. Children & their Parents’; ‘VII. Palliative Care and End-of-Life Issues’; and ‘VIII. Genetic Testing & Counseling’.

In both content and process, the range of focus in this set is from early beginner to quite advanced,. Although there are seasoned clinicians who can benefit from all parts of this set, learners in introductory courses will not be ready for some of the later, most advanced sections, except, perhaps, to help them glimpse challenges they will face in the future. Advanced clinical students, including residents, could profitably use the entire series.

Production and Presentation Techniques

The lead author, Dr. Robert Buckman, an oncologist at the University of Toronto who is also an experienced television broadcaster, hosts the series. Dr. Buckman

conducts all of the interviews that illustrate the points and principles he discusses. The viewer is given considerable control over the presentation of the material. On the program's presentation screen, which takes over the full screen of the viewing monitor, the user can control the audio volume, move forward or backward in the segment that is currently playing, turn the "learning notes" on or off, and skip directly ahead or back among these notes. The learning notes are comments and explanations that appear on the screen (if you choose) while video segments are playing, emphasizing and reinforcing elements of the scene that is being viewed. The functions of each of the available on-screen control buttons is explained in a pop-up label, which appears as you pass the cursor over that button. Key bibliographic references are also presented on-screen. Included in the package is a pocket-sized booklet that summarizes the central techniques of basic communication and of breaking bad news that are introduced on the CD-ROMs.

The moderately sophisticated operational design requires some computer skill. Users who have not previously used similar programs will need to become familiar with the available options. They will also need to understand that the full potential of this learning resource will not be realized if it is treated as a linear event, as if it were a videotape moving inexorably from beginning to end. The interactive potential is considerable and should not be overlooked because of inexperience, timidity or lack of awareness.

Actors portray the patients in each of the segments. If you have any doubts that simulated patients can be realistic and feel authentic you are likely to have your doubts erased by this series. These actors are strikingly good and have clearly been well coached.

Full-screen video requires more storage space than CD-ROMs can hold. To get a meaningful number of video segments on each CD, the producers present the video in a small window on the screen. Little is lost if the viewers sit quite close to the screen. The small size of this window, however, makes this series sub-optimal for presentations to large groups. For such presentations, say for orientation purposes, I recommend acquiring the videotape versions. I have not seen them, but I have been told the video is in full-screen format. For interactive exercises with small groups, the CDs would be preferable to tapes.

Educational Value ... and Limits

This well produced, elegantly presented series is rich with good information and ideas. The host is energetic, clear, and accomplished. But is this series good education? Well, "yes and no." The content is of the highest quality. In fact, I suspect that this set of CDs presents more appropriate, important information about clinical communication than is offered in the entire curriculum of some schools. Yet, with some regret, I must observe that this series—like too much live education—is fundamentally a didactic presentation. At its heart, this is a

series of illustrated lectures. Certainly, it is among the most effectively presented set of illustrated lectures I've witnessed in a career of observing educators at work. But didactic instruction, at any level, is not optimal instruction. Learning doesn't take place as a result of watching others perform, no matter how expertly they do so. There is no number of times that learners can watch someone else demonstrate a set of skills as a way of becoming skilled themselves. When seeking to cultivate complex skills, there is no substitute for personal practice, combined with self-assessment and constructive feedback.

Does this series still have potential value? Could this series be used as part of a larger program that provides practice and feedback? The reply to both questions is "absolutely yes ... under some conditions." Happily, the combination of the inherent quality of the material and the flexibility that is offered by the technology provides the potential for this to be a highly valuable educational resource. The most important condition for achieving this set's full potential will be the guidance of a skilled teacher who is intimately familiar with the series and its operation.

Might the series have potential value for learners even if there is not a strong program of teaching clinical communication into which it can fit or a skilled teacher to help with the process? The answer is a qualified "yes." The series itself doesn't encourage or demand the active participation of viewers, so someone in the educational program will need to convey that expectation to the learners. In too many programs, unfortunately, learners need guidance if they are to avoid being merely passive observers of these video presentations, as they are in the habit of being in so many other presentations.

Using this Series Optimally

I would have liked this series to have included challenges to the viewers to think actively about the tasks faced at multiple branch points within each encounter. Although it doesn't do that, a live teacher can. An optimal approach to using this series, in my view, would be some variation on the following set of arrangements. For small group instruction, a teacher who has become familiar with the recorded scenarios, and perhaps benefited from the "learning notes," could present selected interactions that are appropriate for the learners' levels of readiness, with the notes turned off. The teacher would interrupt the playback of scenes at key decision points in the middle of exchanges, inviting the learners to propose interpretations of what is happening and offer suggestions of what could be done next by the clinician. The teacher might invite the learners to then role-play and comment upon one or more of their proposed approaches before viewing the rest of the scenario. Such an approach would make for truly active learning. The learners would be fully engaged, having to think systematically about the content and process, and they would be having some of the practice they need for lasting learning.

In the “Dealing with Feelings” and the “Breaking Bad News” sections, many of the interactions are emotionally quite powerful. After being viewed, some time for reflection and discussion would be desirable. As presented in this set, the segments move quickly (even abruptly) from one to the next. I would like to have seen the viewers (teachers/learners) encouraged to pause the playback at the end of most segments to reflect on and deal with their own feelings at those moments. After each segment they would also have profited from an invitation to explore the lessons learned and to consider questions, ideas, and concerns they may have. Even though the series doesn’t take these steps, I encourage any teachers who get this set to do so. Sufficiently comfortable and sophisticated teachers could even make good use of many of these segments to help learners with the important tasks of accessing and understanding their own feelings in relation to the many emotional challenges presented in the process of providing clinical care.

Part I helpfully offers both positive and negative examples of some interactions. I would have liked the negative examples to have been presented before the positive examples, and to have been offered throughout the series, not just in Part I. This would make for a better learning sequence and experience. I encourage teachers who use this set to start with the available negative examples, inviting learners to critique those segments before witnessing the improvement offered in the positive version. Unfortunately, some of the available negative examples have a red “do not” symbol across the screen, which reduces their learning value.

Quibbles

This set has been produced at a sufficiently high standard that it prompts me to wish for even more. There are minor technical glitches that could occasionally be distracting to those paying close attention. On CD-1, the video illustrating “proxemics” (the organization of the clinician’s desk and office seating arrangement) unintentionally presents the “correction” of the initial problems twice (two variations—“takes”—of the same information). There are some rare typographic errors in the on-screen text. The volume balance is not sustained throughout, so that adjustments need to be made manually from time to time to achieve a consistent level of amplification. Although the host conveys a far more professional on-screen presence than most faculty would, his fairly frequent and wide arm waving can be distracting, especially with the tightly shot video used in most episodes.

Conclusions

This CD-ROM set presents a rich and valuable set of resources that could contribute to most educational programs in the health professions that focus on

the skills of clinical communication. Not all parts will be equally valuable in all settings or for learners at all levels, but this set should not be seen as a single unit, to be used in its totality. Rather, this set should be seen as a generous buffet from which selections can be made to suit the needs of particular situations and learners. Used appropriately, especially with the guidance of a skilled teacher and supplemented with discussion and practice, this set can be a highly valuable resource for many kinds of learners, ranging from beginning students in the health professions to residents to seasoned practitioners. There is material here of potential value at all these levels. Considering the importance of its content and the quality of the production, this set is a great bargain that just about any school or postgraduate program should be able to—and should choose to—afford. After all, where else can such a small payment get you a highly skilled presenter of vital material who will be available to contribute at any time, as many times as you want, and who never even asks for a coffee break?

Notes

Use of this set requires:

- on PCs: 100 MHz Pentium Processor or higher, with Windows 3.1, 95, NT, or higher, 16 MB of RAM, thousands of colors, SoundBlaster compatible sound card, and a 4x CD-ROM drive and 20 MB of free disk space.
- on Macs: Macintosh or PowerMacintosh, with System 7x or later, 16 MB of RAM, thousands of colors, a double speed CD-ROM drive and 20 MB of free disk space.

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HILLIARD JASON, MD, EdD
 Editor, Education for Health
 Clinical Professor, Family Medicine
 University of Colorado School of Medicine
 H.Jason@uchsc.edu