

# The LINGENFELTER LETTER



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## PATIENT-PHYSICIAN COMMUNICATIONS MAY DECLINE WITH AFFORDABLE CARE ACT

There is a familiar list of patient complaints about doctors. Doctors are rude. They don't listen, don't have time, and don't explain things in terms patients can grasp. Many patients think doctors need to work on their people skills. A good patient-physician relationship and communications can lead to better care, lower costs and a possible decrease in the risk of lawsuits. Medical schools, health systems, malpractice insurers and hospitals are setting up education programs to help doctors improve their bedside manners. The new programs are available to everyone from medical students to seasoned physicians. Under new Medicare rules, doctors and other providers will receive reduced reimbursement if they obtain poor patient satisfaction scores or have too many preventable readmissions.

Doctors can often miss important health cues about patients when they do not listen, and these missed cues can lead to misdiagnoses. Patients who do not comprehend what their doctors say often fail to follow the recommended regimen, which can lead to hospitalizations, complications and poor outcomes. The risk of non-adherence is 19% higher among patients whose doctors communicate poorly compared to those whose doctors communicate well, according to a 2009 review of 100 studies published in the journal *Medical Care*. The journal also found that when doctors get training in communications skills, the odds of patient compliance are 12% higher than when doctors do not receive such training. A breakdown in physician-patient communication is cited in 40% or more of medical malpractice suits.

How will the Affordable Care Act (ACA) affect the time doctors have to communicate with patients?

Expectations are that 30 million new people will enter the health care system in 2014. Experts say an impending doctor shortage is on the horizon. According to Vitals, a company that provides consumer search tools for physician evaluation, the shortage is expected to hit primary care physicians (PCPs) the hardest. Currently, there is approximately one PCP for every 1,500 people in the United States, but by 2020, there will be an estimated 70,000 fewer doctors available to consumers as a direct result of the law. According to a recent 2013 Deloitte survey of U.S. physicians, 57% of the doctors surveyed view changes in the industry under health care reform as a threat. Six in 10 physicians report that early retirement of many physicians in the next two or three years will fuel the shortage. The number of people in the patient pool will increase by 12% next year, but the supply of doctors will hold at the current level. Vitals finds that patients are waiting 6% longer to see their doctors and spending an average of only six minutes in the examination room.

Older patients will feel the brunt of the doctor shortage, and ACA is expected to cause a shortage of PCPs at the same time when the aging population will be seeking help. Elderly patients are turning to retail clinics at drugstores because of their convenience and lower costs. More patients will be seeing registered nurses and physician assistants more often as doctors continue having less and less time. Coordination of care and communication between providers may be a major problem in the future, even with the availability of electronic medical records.

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