

The Doctor-Patient Relationship in India: An Evolving Dynamic Rooted in Tradition and Modernity

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Abstract:

The doctor-patient relationship is fundamental to the success of any healthcare system. In India, this relationship is uniquely influenced by both modern healthcare practices and ancient healing traditions like Ayurveda, Siddha, and Unani. This paper provides a comprehensive examination of the doctor-patient dynamic in India, emphasising the strengths of traditional Indian medicine, and exploring how it informs contemporary healthcare practices. It highlights India's progress in healthcare delivery, the intersection of ancient healing systems with modern medicine, and presents data from WHO and other relevant sources, illustrating India's evolving commitment to holistic health.

Introduction:

Indian Wisdom about how Doctors should be perceived:

व्याधेस्तत्त्वपरिज्ञानं वेदनायाश्च निग्रहः।

एतद्वैद्यस्य वैद्यत्वं न वैद्यः प्रभुरायुषः।

योग रत्नकर

Indian Wisdom about how Doctors should perceive:

मैत्री कारुण्यमातेर्षु शक्ये प्रीतिरुपेक्षणम्।

प्रकृतिस्थेषु भूतेषु वैद्यवृत्तिश्चतुर्विधाचरक सूत्र ९/२६

चरक संहिता

Healthcare systems globally are predicated on the bond between doctors and patients, a relationship that directly impacts diagnosis, treatment, and recovery. In India, the doctor-patient relationship is particularly nuanced, shaped by millennia-old traditional medical systems alongside advancements in modern healthcare. India's healthcare framework presents a compelling case study of how traditional wisdom, such as that found in Ayurveda and Siddha, continues to play a role in patient care today. This paper argues that India's approach to healthcare—rooted in holistic treatment, personalised care, and a deep understanding of the human body's equilibrium—provides a model for improving healthcare outcomes globally.

India's Healthcare Investment and Infrastructure: A Progressive Approach

India has seen substantial improvements in its healthcare infrastructure, although its public expenditure on health remains relatively low at around 3.01% of GDP in 2021. Despite this, India's healthcare sector is the fastest-growing in the world, driven by government initiatives and a burgeoning private healthcare industry. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that India's private sector now handles nearly 70% of outpatient care and 60% of hospital care, making it a key player in expanding access to healthcare services.

The introduction of Ayushman Bharat, a government healthcare scheme launched in 2018, is an example of India's proactive steps toward increasing access to healthcare. As the largest healthcare initiative globally, it aims to provide free healthcare to over 500 million people. While modern medicine is an integral part of Ayushman Bharat, the initiative also encourages the integration of India's traditional medicine systems. This blending of modern and traditional healthcare systems represents a significant opportunity

to improve doctor-patient relationships by offering a holistic approach that resonates with patients' cultural expectations.

The Positive Impact of India's Ancient Medical Principles

India's healthcare system is one of the oldest in the world, with its roots extending back thousands of years. Ancient texts such as the Charaka Samhita (circa 1st century BCE) and the Sushruta Samhita (circa 6th century BCE) provides a detailed understanding of disease prevention, patient care, and treatment that is still relevant today. These texts are grounded in the principle that the human body is a holistic system and that wellness arises from balancing the body's physical, mental, and spiritual elements. This patient-centric model is at the core of both ancient and modern Indian medical practices.

Ayurveda, in particular, emphasises a holistic approach to healing, where the patient's lifestyle, diet, emotional state, and environmental factors are all considered part of the treatment plan. This principle is aligned with contemporary movements toward personalised medicine, which tailors treatment to the individual's needs. Ayurvedic treatment has also been used in India for chronic conditions such as arthritis, diabetes, and digestive disorders. A 2019 study conducted by the National Ayurvedic Medical Association showed that over 60% of patients using Ayurvedic treatments experienced improved outcomes when combining it with conventional medical care.

Yoga and meditation, integral components of Indian medical philosophy, have also gained global recognition for their benefits in reducing stress, improving mental health, and increasing overall well-being. The Indian government has actively promoted the use of Yoga as part of its healthcare strategy, with the International Day of Yoga on June 21st acting as a global reminder of India's contribution to holistic health practices.

Integrating Modern and Traditional Systems: A Case Study Approach

India's healthcare system provides a successful example of integrating modern medicine with ancient healing systems. The Ministry of AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy) has played a crucial role in this integration. Formed in 2014, this ministry is dedicated to promoting these traditional practices on a national scale and ensuring that they work in harmony with modern medicine. The government has also increased funding for research into AYUSH therapies, particularly focusing on their effectiveness in treating chronic and lifestyle-related diseases, which have become increasingly common in India due to changing dietary and lifestyle patterns.

A key example of this integration is cancer treatment at the All India Institute of Ayurveda (AIIA) in Delhi, where oncologists combine modern treatments like chemotherapy with Ayurvedic therapies aimed at reducing side effects and improving the quality of life for cancer patients. Research conducted at AIIA shows that patients who underwent both types of treatment reported higher satisfaction levels, better mental health, and faster recovery compared to those receiving only conventional treatment.

The Evolution of the Doctor-Patient Relationship in Modern India

In contemporary India, the doctor-patient relationship is evolving. While traditional reverence for doctors remains strong, patients are becoming more proactive in their healthcare decisions, demanding better communication, transparency, and empathy. Studies conducted by the Indian Journal of Medical Ethics show that 85% of Indian patients prioritise clear communication and personalised care in their interactions with doctors. This shift reflects changing expectations within a rapidly modernising healthcare landscape.

Healthcare institutions have also recognized this shift and are now placing greater emphasis on improving doctor-patient communication through training programs. The Indian Medical Association (IMA) has been working with medical schools to incorporate courses on empathy and communication, essential for building trust and improving healthcare outcomes. A survey conducted in 2020 by the IMA found that 78% of doctors who underwent communication training reported improved patient satisfaction levels.

This emphasis on communication aligns with India's traditional focus on the patient as an individual, rather than just a case of symptoms. The ancient Indian principle of "Sattva" (mental clarity) in Ayurveda suggests that effective treatment begins with understanding the patient's psychological and emotional state, an approach now being embraced in modern healthcare practices.

The Role of Healthcare Providers in Rural India

India's rural population, comprising 65.97% of the total population, presents unique challenges and opportunities for the doctor-patient relationship. Rural areas are often underserved by healthcare providers due to geographical barriers and limited infrastructure. However, traditional healing systems have historically flourished in these regions, providing an accessible form of treatment when modern facilities are unavailable.

Recent efforts by the government have focused on bringing modern healthcare to rural India through mobile medical units, telemedicine, and expanding the Ayushman Bharat scheme to remote areas. According to a 2023 WHO report, these efforts have already increased healthcare access in rural regions by 25%. In particular, telemedicine has helped bridge the gap between doctors and patients, allowing rural populations to consult with healthcare providers remotely and receive modern medical advice while still maintaining the benefits of traditional medicine.

Statistical Insights: India's Healthcare Progress

Healthcare Expenditure: According to the World Bank, India's healthcare expenditure as a percentage of GDP increased to 3.01% in 2021, with continued growth expected in light of recent investments under Ayushman Bharat and other public health programs. Although lower than the global average, the Indian healthcare sector is projected to grow at 19% annually.

Doctor-Patient Ratio: As of 2023, India has approximately 1 doctor for every 1456 patients, a number still below the WHO recommendation of 1:1000. However, significant strides are being made to address this shortage, particularly through telemedicine and healthcare training initiatives.

Traditional Medicine Use: According to the Ministry of AYUSH, approximately 77% of Indian households use

traditional medicine as part of their overall healthcare regime, either as a complement or alternative to modern treatments.

Future of Doctor-Patient Relationships: Toward a Holistic Model

As India continues to strengthen its healthcare system, the integration of modern and traditional medicine holds enormous potential to improve the doctor-patient relationship. The future lies in adopting a more holistic approach, where both forms of medicine are valued equally, and where the focus remains on the individual patient's unique needs. In this regard, India is positioning itself as a global leader in healthcare innovation, offering a model that not only embraces technological advancements but also remains rooted in the wisdom of its ancient medical systems.

The Influence of a Doctor's Energy, Behavior, and Gestures on the Healing Process

The therapeutic relationship between doctor and patient has long been recognized as central to the healing process. While medical expertise is undeniably critical, the way a physician communicates, their demeanour, and the energy they bring to their interactions with patients can be just as crucial in influencing health outcomes. A growing body of research suggests that doctors who exhibit empathy, clarity, and emotional support contribute significantly to a patient's recovery and emotional well-being, a principle supported by both psychological and physiological evidence. This paper delves into how a doctor's behaviour, gestures, and overall energy affect healing, with a personal reflection on my experience with Dr. M. Rajapurkar when I was diagnosed with a debilitating kidney disease.

The Psychological Impact of a Doctor's Demeanour

When patients are diagnosed with life-altering conditions, such as chronic kidney disease, their mental state can dramatically influence their physical response to treatment. The emotional toll of facing an uncertain future often leaves patients feeling isolated, vulnerable, and anxious. According to the American Psychological Association, patients experiencing positive

emotional interactions with healthcare providers exhibit lower levels of stress, which can contribute to improved physical outcomes. A doctor's empathy, attentiveness, and ability to foster a sense of reassurance are integral in transforming the clinical encounter from a purely transactional one into a supportive and therapeutic relationship.

My personal experience with Dr. M. Rajapurkar stands as a testament to the profound effect that a doctor's behaviour can have on a patient's healing process. At the time, I had been diagnosed with a debilitating kidney disease. I found myself navigating a labyrinth of medical jargon, tests, and uncertainties. It is in these moments of vulnerability that the role of a doctor extends far beyond the technical—what the patient remembers is not just the treatment but how they were treated as a person. Dr. Rajapurkar's approach exemplified this.

A Doctor's Role in Alleviating Anxiety Through Communication

One of the central aspects of effective doctor-patient relationships is communication. Studies have shown that a lack of clear communication can increase a patient's anxiety, thereby hampering the healing process. A survey published by the British Medical Journal in 2020 indicated that 72% of patients who felt their doctors took the time to explain diagnoses and treatments reported higher satisfaction with care and were more likely to adhere to prescribed treatments. These patients also showed signs of quicker recovery and a lower incidence of stress-related complications.

Dr. M. Rajapurkar, the Head of Department for Nephrology at MBPUH, and recipient of the esteemed Padma Shri award, in my case, made it a point to clearly differentiate between the available treatment options. He demystified the concept of "premium" versus "general" treatment options, explaining that the same medical procedures, tests, and treatments would be carried out in both settings, with the only difference being the cost and the luxuries of a private room. His transparency alleviated concerns that I might be taken advantage of or seen as just another "cash cow"—a common fear for patients dealing with chronic conditions in the healthcare system.

The way he addressed my concerns not only clarified my options but also contributed to a sense of trust and comfort. When doctors engage in straightforward, patient-centered communication, they create a space where the patient feels less burdened by fear and uncertainty, which can greatly enhance the psychological readiness for treatment and subsequent recovery.

During one of my consultations with Dr. M. Rajapurkar, the head of the nephrology department, I was invited to participate in a long-term research study focused on nephrology treatments. His reputation drew patients from all across India and even beyond, yet despite his constant stream of appointments and responsibilities, he never made me feel rushed or insignificant. He took the time to explain the study thoroughly, outlining that each time I participated, I would need to endure a needle prick to give blood, and there would be no immediate benefit for me. The study's conclusions, he explained, would take decades to emerge and might not even yield positive results.

When I mentioned that perhaps my participation might help someone one day, his response was refreshingly candid. He told me that it was possible the study might not help anyone at all—it could even end up proving ineffective. He was clear that it was completely my choice whether to take part or not, and there was no pressure either way.

What struck me most about this exchange was not just the transparency but the way Dr. Rajapurkar, despite being the head of a busy department, treated this moment with the same weight and care as any other. It was then that I realized something profound about the way he approached his work: doctors shouldn't only make time for patients when they're free. Instead, it is about what they choose to fill their time with, no matter how busy they are. In that moment, he chose to make me feel seen and heard, ensuring I understood every aspect before making any decisions.

The Power of Levity in Medicine

Levity and humour, when used appropriately, can have a powerful impact on a patient's perception of their illness and its trajectory.

According to a 2019 study published in the Journal of General Internal Medicine humour used by doctors in clinical settings can reduce anxiety and stress levels in patients, improve mood, and foster stronger rapport between doctor and patient. This aligns with broader psychological theories that emphasise the role of emotional lightness in reducing cortisol levels, improving immune function, and enhancing patient cooperation with treatment plans.

In my own experience, Dr. Rajapurkar used humour to address baseless concerns that I had about some test indicators. He gently pointed out how my worry was unnecessary, doing so in a way that was light-hearted and uplifting. His ability to add levity to an otherwise sombre situation had an immediate effect on my emotional state. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by the gravity of my condition, I felt seen and understood as a person, not just a patient. The fact that he could ease the weight of my fear made me feel less alone in the process, fostering a sense of shared humanity that bridged the traditional distance between doctor and patient.

Gestures and Non-Verbal Communication in Healing

Non-verbal communication, including gestures, body language, and facial expressions, plays a crucial role in how patients perceive their doctor and, by extension, their treatment. Studies in the field of psychoneuroimmunology have shown that positive non-verbal cues from doctors—such as maintaining eye contact, open body posture, and gentle gestures—can lower patients' blood pressure and heart rate, while also enhancing their confidence in treatment. Patients who feel genuinely cared for through such non-verbal interactions are more likely to experience positive health outcomes.

During my treatment, Dr. Rajapurkar's mannerisms were calm and composed. His eye contact, the occasional reassuring smile, and his attentiveness to even the most mundane concerns conveyed a message that he was present and invested in my well-being. He did not rush through appointments or brush aside my questions. These small but significant gestures played a key role in making me feel that I was in capable and caring hands. This, in turn, reduced my anxiety and gave me the psychological resilience needed to navigate the challenges of my illness.

Emotional and Physiological Outcomes of Positive Doctor-Patient Relationships

The impact of a doctor's energy and behaviour extends beyond psychological comfort—it also correlates with physiological outcomes. Research shows that patients who report high levels of trust and satisfaction with their doctor are more likely to adhere to treatment plans and show signs of faster recovery. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), patient adherence to treatment regimens can increase by as much as 40% when doctors engage with empathy and offer emotional support.

In my case, the way Dr. Rajapurkar presented the treatment options, his transparency, and his consistent reassurance helped me stay committed to my treatment. This emotional grounding positively impacted my physical recovery, as I was more motivated to engage in my healing process, less weighed down by fear, and more hopeful about my future.

Conclusion:

The healing process is not simply a matter of medical intervention; it is deeply intertwined with the emotional, psychological, and social dynamics present in the doctor-patient relationship. A doctor's energy, behaviour, and gestures—whether through empathetic communication, light-hearted humour, or attentive gestures—can significantly enhance a patient's healing journey. My experience with Dr. M. Rajapurkar highlights the profound impact that such qualities can have on patient well-being. By fostering a relationship based on trust, empathy, and transparency, he not only facilitated my medical treatment but also nurtured the emotional resilience necessary to navigate a challenging diagnosis. This case exemplifies the critical role of positive doctor-patient dynamics in achieving better healthcare outcomes, a principle that holds universal value across medical systems.

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