

# On Establishing Trust

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## Abstract

Mutual understanding and trust are most easily attained between persons who share a common cultural background. Persons of color often see physicians as members of an alien culture who are not to be trusted. Physicians can and should transcend cultural barriers and secure the trust of patients of color. To do this, a common culture is not required; effort, kindness and sympathy are. **Key Words:** Medical ethics, physician-patient relationship, physician communication, minorities, health care.

NO ONE HERE would protest too vehemently, I believe, if I were to say that it is easier to trust the familiar than the unfamiliar. It is apparent, for instance, that African people are most comfortable with other African people or that Eastern Europeans are more comfortable with other Eastern Europeans. It is also apparent that communication between Africans flows easily and that misunderstandings between them are relatively few. In the same vein, only an Indian person among other Indians can comfortably tell Indian jokes, only Jewish people can tell Jewish jokes, only camels can tell hump jokes. Certainly, a buzzard who tells hump jokes would get a cool reception from any self-respecting camel.

What needs to be involved in the interaction between a comic and his audience so that laughter results? Well, in order for a joke to be funny both the joker and the listener must be operating within the same context. For example, "knock-knock" jokes are distinctly American. An American comic who makes his debut in Africa telling "knock-knock" jokes can most probably kiss his career goodbye. That the listener and his audience share a common language is also essential. After all, how can one who doesn't speak German laugh at a joke told in German? If a familiar context and a common language are present, then trust can follow. In particular, the listener can trust that the joke is not on her.

The relationship between a good physician and her patient is very similar to that between a comic and his audience. Permit me for a moment to return to our buzzard sitting comfortably in a tree telling hump jokes to a bunch of camels who are stiffly unmused. If this buzzard were to prove, by leading said camels to an oasis, that his agenda does not include hovering above them in anticipation of camel kebab, mightn't the camels loosen up? They might not find his jokes any funnier, but they just might trust, at least, that the buzzard means them no harm.

Now there may be some among you who believe that I have digressed. So let me pause here to tell you that the buzzard represents physicians today and the camels represent those of their patients who are people of color. Unfortunately, there is little chance of running into Black or Hispanic physicians. People of color, for the most part, deal with physicians who not only operate within a different context but who also speak an unfamiliar language. If my discussion has made sense so far, it would follow that there is little chance for trust in this particular relationship. Can't a way be found to smooth over the differences?

Imagine for a minute that after a hard day at work you return home to find any one of the following scenarios: (1) your teenage son has bought you dinner with his weekly allowance; (2) your husband has brought you a single yellow rose on a day that doesn't even remotely resemble Valentine's Day; (3) your mother-in-law, hearing that you are recovering from the flu, has decided for your sake not to join the family for dinner after all. Unexpected events such as these can work wonders for one's mood. They might even make your day.

Now, think how you would feel if you were a patient whose physician has just approached you with a warm smile. Who doesn't understand a smile? Smiles don't need translation; they transcend the barriers of language. A smile can even make a person's day. Which mother's son wouldn't like to see his mother's medicine regimen written out on a small piece of paper so that his mother might refer to it daily? Doctors and patients don't have to speak the same language or even operate within the same context. They just have to establish a basis for trust, and the rest follows. Kindness, patience, and sympathy are universally comprehensible. Each of these can bridge barriers. They require only a modicum of effort. But why should you take this from me? After all, I am only a young medical student who tells buzzard jokes, and bad ones at that. Why take it from me? Simple. You must remember that although I am studying to be a buzzard, I was born a camel.

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