

Identifying Factors that Influence Patient's Trust in General Practitioners

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Trust is fundamental for a positive patient-GP relationship. This prospective exploratory study aims to identify factors that influence patient's trust in General Practitioners (GPs). Empirical studies have determined that patient's trust in physician is associated with timely diagnosis¹, continuity of care, reduced referral rates, and patient's self-reported ability to manage their chronic disease.

A 6-month survey was conducted in an Irish urban practice, Scanlon Medical Centre, Tullamore, between February to July 2020, after permission from the GP Principal. The authors devised a paper questionnaire asking patients to score their trust in GPs based on 10 factors. Patients scored their trust using a 5-point Likert scale (1=No trust, 2=Slightly trust, 3=Neutral, 4=Mostly trust, 5=Completely trust).

Factors were chosen on the knowledge of the authors that were felt to influence trust. The 10 factors were, 1. (Behaviour) GP's behaviour towards the patient during consultation (being empathic, respectful, and attentive), 2. (Knowledge) GP's thorough knowledge of the patient's medical problems and provision of successful treatment, 3. (Communication) GP's communication about medical problems and treatment in a manner that the patient understands, 4. (Honesty) GP's honesty about the patient's medical condition or when an error may have occurred in relation to care, 5. (Staff) Good care provided by other staff in the GP's Practice (Nurses & Receptionists), 6. (Social) GP's good reputation portrayed by social circle of family and friends, 7. (Media) GP's good reputation portrayed by the media, 8. (Involvement) GP's involvement of the patient in decisions about care and treatment options, 9. (Accessibility) GP's accessibility (how easily and early a GP can be contacted), 10. (Video) Having a Video consultation with a GP (using Internet or mobile medical applications to connect with a GP). Patients routinely attending the practice voluntarily participated in the survey. Participants included registered patients of the practice who consented to the study and aged ≥ 18 years. Participant responses were collated using Microsoft Excel.

Our study included N=235 participants, 70 males and 165 females. Most participants aged under 65 years (65%, n=153/235). The mean duration of GP continuity of care in participants was 20 ± 10 years. As score 5 represents complete trust, for each factor we analysed the total number of participants who answered score '5=Completely trust'.

Of the 10 factors, 'communication' had the greatest number of participants who answered score '5=Completely trust' (85%, n=200/235). Thereafter, knowledge (79%, n=186/235), behaviour (74%, n=175/235), honesty (74%, n=175/235), staff (74%, n=175/235), involvement (73%, n=172/235), accessibility (68%, n=161/235), social (57%, n=133/235), media (48%, n=112/235), and video (30%, n=70/235).

Our study concludes that 'communication' had the greatest number of respondents for score '5=Completely trust'. This may suggest that the communication of the GP can lead to trust more readily than any of the factors in the questionnaire. A trusting doctor-patient relationship is facilitated by improved communication². An effective, empathic physician-patient communication leads to improved patient compliance, better clinical outcomes, and reduction in "doctor-shopping" and malpractice litigations³. The COVID-19 pandemic challenged Irish General Practice during the study period. In such times trust between patient-GP is even more crucial. Patient's trust in GPs is high⁴.

Ethical Approval:

This study was granted full Ethical approval by the Ethics Committee of the Irish College of General Practitioners.

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