

February More Voices: Listening

Category: Listening

written by Paul Gross | February 1, 2022

Dear *Pulse* readers,

If someone were to ask me what's the most important and rewarding part of being a doctor, I would probably answer: Listening.

Listening?

That answer might seem odd: You don't need to go to medical school to learn how to listen.

I supposed that's true. It's like that old paradox: When our children are born, we're anxious for them to learn to walk and talk. Once they do, we keep telling them to sit down and be quiet.

As a doctor-in-training, I memorized lots of facts and associations that I was expected to rattle off at a moment's notice. But once I started seeing patients, I discovered it might be best to hold my tongue.

I recall my very first patient interviews—asking something, then half-listening to the answer as I rummaged through my mental file cabinets for the next question.

As someone once pointed out, we all worry, *What do I say?* The real question is: *What do I hear?*

I learned the power of listening when I was in my twenties, trying to figure out my path in life, which brought me to a therapist.

She had a look of warmth and concern, and when I spoke, she did not interject advice, as my parents would have done; rather, she listened.

And listened.

And asked.

And listened some more.

This was a revelation to me—a whole different way of being in the world and of caring for someone.

While an important part of my work is making diagnoses and prescribing remedies, I also see my role as using my authority as a physician to make my patients feel seen and heard. To value and validate them in the hopes that they will value and care for themselves and their loved ones.

I do that by listening.

The irony is that efforts to standardize primary care—a laudable goal—have become embodied in electronic health records and checklists of recommended questions and tests.

The result? Time spent rattling off questions and entering responses—which translates into less time for listening to patients with wholehearted attention.

The last time I visited my own doctor—it had been awhile—he entered the exam room, sat down, faced me with a look of curiosity and concern and asked, “So how are you?”

And he waited for my answer.

What a gift.

February's More Voices theme is [Listening](#). Send us your lived experience. And while you're at it, have a look at last month's theme: [Omicron](#).

For more details, visit [More Voices FAQs](#)—or go directly to the [More Voices Submission Form](#).

Remember, your health-related story should be 40-400 words. And no poetry, please.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Happy Groundhog Day!

With warm regards,

Paul Gross

Editor