

An experimental investigation of when older patients follow doctors' recommendations

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Successful medical treatment relies on patient compliance with doctor recommendations (Beck, Daughtridge & Sloane, 2002). Yet statistics on patient compliance suggest that between 40% and 50% of patients fail to comply fully with doctors' recommendations (e.g., American Heart Association, 2003). In this project, we experimentally manipulated three factors that could shape patient compliance. First, many patients are sensitive to how a doctor treats them, reporting less willingness to comply with healthcare providers who use jargon, speak baby talk, or do not listen. Second, many patients are interested in whether the doctor answers all their questions; regardless of how the doctor treats them. Third, perceived age differences between patients and doctors may shape patients' compliance. Older patients might expect older and younger doctors to treat them differently, or have different levels of experience and knowledge. Although surveys and close observations of doctor-patient interactions suggest the importance of these three factors (see Taylor, 2003 for a review), as far as we know, there are no experimental investigations of these factors with a significantly older population. Therefore, we surveyed ninety-one participants (average age=80) who read and evaluated a short description of a first visit to a doctor in which the 1) degree of interpersonal respect, 2) amount of information given and 3) perceived age of the doctor was manipulated.

Results show that participants reported more willingness to follow advice and return for future appointments when the doctor was presented as respectful and informative. However, participants reported more willingness to comply with a respectful older doctor in comparison to a respectful younger doctor. In contrast, they reported less willingness to comply with a disrespectful older doctor in comparison to a disrespectful younger doctor. We believe that participants' greater sensitivity to older doctors' behavior reflects differences in their expectations for older and younger health care providers. Older doctors who treat their elderly patients respectfully may reap greater benefits from their efforts in comparison to younger doctors, but if patients view them as disrespectful, it may lead to even greater difficulties.