How to Say ‘I’m Sorry’ for Unexpected Outcomes

BY DENISE NAPOLI
Assistant Editor

WASHINGTON — An empathetic disclosure that a medical error has occurred, accompanied by a genuine apology, may help avoid a malpractice lawsuit, according to Dr. Neil S. Prose, director of pediatric dermatology at Duke University Medical Center, Durham, N.C.

On an almost daily basis, doctors are called on to deal with patient disappointment. Some cases involve medical mistakes and others do not. In any case, “How we communicate with patients and their families is really half of the work we do as doctors, and the other half is diagnosis and treatment,” Dr. Prose said at an annual meeting of the American Academy of Dermatology. “Unfortunately, we spend a lot of time on diagnosis and treatment and never talk about what we say to patients and how they respond, and so a whole half of our lives is neglected.”

In a presentation designed by the Institute for Healthcare Communication (formerly the Bayer Institute), a nonprofit group dedicated to improving communication between physicians and patients, Dr. Prose discussed empathetic ways of speaking with patients when they have experienced disappointing outcomes, either with or without a medical mistake on the health care provider’s behalf. He stressed, however, that his recommendations are generic skills and that, when appropriate, the counsel of a lawyer or risk management team should be heeded.

► Create the right setting. Close the door and make sure that the room is quiet. If possible, turn off any phones or pagers. Sit down. Offering the apology while seated, rather than standing, can aid pagers. Sit down. Offering the apology at the door and make sure that the room is quiet.

► Be aware of your own feelings. Be a good listener. “Our biggest pitfall [as physicians] is trying to talk people out of the way they’re feeling,” he said. “Listen before giving advice, and relisten to the story, as much as you don’t want to hear it.”

► Get permission to proceed. Finally, after telling the truth and listening patiently, “you reach a point where you actually ask permission before moving on. Say, ‘Would this be an okay time for me to tell you what I think we should do next?’ That process has a remarkable effect,” Dr. Prose said.

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