

Interview with Professor Minerva Becker about communication between radiologists and patients

Professor Becker, could you please explain why is it so important that radiologists communicate with patients? Traditionally, this is rather considered to be the role of the referring physicians.

First of all, radiology, as a clinical discipline, involves natural communication between radiologists and patients, evident in practices like ultrasonography, breast imaging, image-guided biopsy, fluoroscopy, and image-guided therapeutic interventions. Secondly, in my opinion, direct patient-radiologist interaction is vital due to the operator-dependent nature of radiological interpretation and because communication ensures that all relevant clinical information is considered, preventing loss of information during transmission. Thirdly, patients have the right to access their health data, including diagnostic findings. While some physicians can interpret conventional radiographs, advanced cross-sectional imaging studies with numerous sequences and images are quite challenging. Therefore, patients may seek explanations directly from the imaging expert who made the diagnosis. This means that radiologists must be ready to explain imaging findings to those patients who ask them to do so. Of course, a relationship of trust between radiologists and referring colleagues is crucial in this regard.

Electronic patient portals increasingly enable patients to access radiology reports and images online. What should radiologists keep in mind in this context and how should radiology departments adjust to this change?

Radiologists should familiarize themselves with the varying technical solutions and regulations governing the release of patient reports and images on portals, which can differ between institutions, regions, and countries. Also, they should consider participating in the establishment of these criteria where feasible.

In my experience, when patients access their radiological data online, they may want to discuss complex findings with the diagnosing radiologist and seek second opinions from expert radiologists. This makes patients an additional audience for radiological reports, alongside referring physicians.

To address this, radiology departments should:

1. Provide contact information and efficient communication pathways between radiologists and patients.
2. Collaborate with software engineers and patient representatives to enhance patient understanding of radiological reports. This can involve automatic translation of reports into

consumer-friendly language using AI-powered language processing tools or providing explanatory hyperlinks to multimedia platforms for anatomical or medical terms.

3. Educate non-medical stakeholders, such as hospital administrators and health policymakers, about the value of patient-centered radiological services. These services require resources, including staff time, software tools, and dedicated communication spaces.

How can radiologists improve their communication skills? What are some effective strategies for doing this? What do they need to keep in mind as they begin communicating more directly with patients?

Effective communication skills must be a prominent part of radiological training. Beyond explaining exams, obtaining consent, and conveying results appropriately, essential soft skills involve empathetic, respectful, honest, and confidential interactions with patients and their families. Radiologists should also be capable of discussing results with patients without delving into treatment discussions, collaborate effectively with clinical colleagues, distinguish routine communication from emergency reporting, and gather crucial patient-related information directly.

With the likely integration of AI-powered tools aiding in image interpretation and report generation, future radiologists may have reduced primary reporting duties, allowing more time for patient-centered communication. Thus, the next generation of radiologists should anticipate spending less time on data interpretation and more time on interacting with patients and consulting their multidisciplinary colleagues.

In which way do you believe that the advent of online portals increases radiologists' opportunities to communicate directly with patients? And does direct communication with patients have an impact on the radiologic profession?

We all know that in the past decade, the volume of radiological exams and digital data has by far exceeded the capacity of the radiological workforce. This has led to radiologists often being hidden behind computer screens, with limited patient interaction. However, this type of activity lacks long-term fulfillment, as radiology is inherently clinical and requires patient contact in many cases and medical areas.

As patients of the future become more informed and involved in their healthcare decisions, direct communication with radiologists will help them understand their diagnosis, aiding collaboration with referring physicians. On the one hand, this shift may improve the quality of patient care, on the other hand it may make the radiologist's role more fulfilling, involving greater participation in patient-centered and multidisciplinary activities.

In my daily practice in head and neck radiology, I encounter patients seeking answers to specific questions about their complex diagnoses, which my clinical colleagues cannot address. This scenario is also common among my radiology peers in other clinical domains.