You must trust and believe in people or life becomes impossible.
—Anton Chekhov

Trust: Webster’s Dictionary defines trust as a belief that someone or something is reliable, good, honest, effective, etc.¹

This quality holds special meanings in many relationships. In a marriage, parent-child relationships, friendships and in business, trust is the glue that holds together the promises we make.

What does trust mean in medicine? We trust that our patients will take what we say at face value and use our knowledge to make themselves well. The patients trust that we have their best interests at heart and will do what we are telling them to do without question. Or do they…..

One hundred years ago, faith and trust in doctors was almost implicit. Physicians were looked at as miracle workers, especially when new treatments arose to cure many of the infectious diseases that had previously killed millions. However, trust in physicians, and in the medical profession in general, has been slowly eroding over the past decades as more individuals learn about some of the ethical atrocities performed in the name of science. The Tuskegee syphilis experiment (1932-1972) was the most well known of these, but there were many more such federally funded experiments involving “vulnerable populations” such as the mentally ill or prisoners.² Some were experiments involving military recruits. In 1974, the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) was established to oversee clinical trials so that these terrible events wouldn’t happen again.³ All participants in experiments now need to be fully informed about benefits and harms that might arise as a result of their participation.

Additionally, easy access to the Internet allows patients entrance into numerous sites with false information. Consider how much damage has been done to physician reputations by the falsified data of a British physician published in the Lancet in 1998 on the connection between MMR and Autism⁴, and subsequent endorsement of the false data by Hollywood celebrities. Consider how much longer it took for parents in El Paso to accept the HPV vaccine for their children after radio personalities in Mexico and anecdotal experiences in Japan and Brazil linked it to forced sterilization.⁵

Trust in medicine and in physicians is no longer implied. The doctor-patient relationship is now often tainted by tales of unethical behaviors, falsified credentials, or TV/Internet endorsements by celebrity doctors.

It is our job to rebuild the trust by showing our patients, on an individual level, that we do care about them and their health. In addition, in order to get them to trust us again, we have to learn to trust them. We do that by not assuming that the choices they make are wrong. We must start from a position that they do want what is best for their children or themselves the majority of the time. We are all educators, as well as physicians, and the first step to behavior modification is by educating the patient on why a change is necessary and then letting him come to the same conclusion on his own.

I make it a policy never to dismiss a patient from my practice when the parents refuse a vaccine. My goal is to get that child vaccinated and to get the parent to understand why it is necessary. I spend much of my time educating parents on vaccine myths and truths, how vaccines are created and why we still need them today. I think 90% of these parents choose to vaccinate when I am done teaching. I consider this a victory.

It is the highest form of honor when a patient calls me up to ask a question, and ends by saying, “I want to know what you think I should do because I trust you.”

Let’s work to bring back trust in medicine on both sides of the examining table.

As a related side note, please make sure to update your addresses (both email and U.S. mailing), especially if you have submitted and article. We need to trust we are sending our magazine to the right place!

REFERENCES