Medical Etiquette

The Oxford English Dictionary says etiquette is “Customary code of polite behavior in society or among the members of a particular profession or a group.” Most medical dictionaries do not list the word “etiquette”. Taber’s Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary defines medical etiquette as “A system of principles governing medical conduct. It deals with the relationship of the doctor with the patient, patient’s family, fellow physicians, and a society at large.” The word etiquette has derived from the Greek word meaning graceful and elegant. Practice of etiquette is as old as practice of medicine as the Hippocratic Oath deals with teaching the art of healing to the offspring of the teacher free of fee.

Though medical students are reasonably exposed to this area of medical practice in their undergraduate curriculum, practice of etiquette is not adequate among the doctors. Use of technology reducing the interpersonal relationships, financial implications and time management problems may be reasons for this situation.

Etiquette is important to the family doctors as well as the practitioners of other disciplines of medicine. Exposure to etiquette is rare in continued professional development activities.

The practice of etiquette involves patients, their relatives, coworkers, colleagues and society at large. Disciplinary or judicial action cannot be taken against a doctor on lack of etiquette. Practice of etiquette makes professional life happy and makes things pleasant for all the stakeholders.

The doctor should be in appropriate attire when on duty. It is good practice for the doctor to greet the patient. Anybody present with the doctor has to be introduced to the patient. The patient should be aware of the reason for any person is present with the doctor. In such situation the patient’s consent should be sought. As telephone calls are a disturbance to consultations, the doctor should exercise adequate compromise regarding the length of such conversations. It is appropriate for the doctor to apologise to the patient regarding the interruption caused by the telephone conversation. The doctor should respect and be sensitive to patients’ time and other commitments. If one has to report for work late because of a priority issue the staff should be instructed to inform patients about the doctor’s delay to commence the consultations. Late arrival should be acknowledged to patients with an apology.

The doctor in attendance should ensure that the staff is properly attired and their conduct is professionally acceptable. While performing their duty the doctors should handle any lapse on the part of their staff, tactfully, without causing any embarrassment. Use of mobile phone by the staff should be restricted.

The etiquette becomes very important in matters relating to colleagues too. When referring patients the letter should be enclosed in a properly addressed envelope, mentioning the professional qualifications and designation of the addressee. The letter has to be precise giving the necessary details and should specify as to what is expected from the recipient. When referring back (for example when referred to be given a course of injections) it is better to thank the colleague and mention any relevant data. No fee should be levied from a colleague seeking a family doctor’s services. When a patient seeks the service of another doctor when his family physician is not available, inform the patient to get back to his regular physician once he is available. The patient of course should not get the impression that he or she is not welcome.

Colleague’s mistakes may be highlighted by patients during consultation. If the criticism is valid the family doctor need not go out of the way to defend the colleague or take an active part in the criticism. The family doctor’s body language (“switched off look”) should convey to them that the doctor is not interested in the subject. A family doctor should not publicly discuss colleague’s errors unless he is representing a National Medical body.

In society the doctor is expected to adhere to the acceptable etiquette norms of the community.

The ethics and etiquette have common areas. Therefore ethics and etiquette are frequently discussed together. But all areas of etiquette do not come under ethics. Being guided by etiquette principles will keep the family doctor and his clients happy. The family doctors peer recognition will be enhanced by being guided by principles of etiquette.