

Physician empathy a key driver of patient satisfaction

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A study presented today at the 2016 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons (AAOS), links patient-perceived physician empathy with improved outcomes and medical care satisfaction.

In the study, 112 new patients (mean age 51) at the Massachusetts General Hospital Department of Orthopaedic Surgery rated personal interaction with their hand surgeon. In addition, patients completed a health literacy test, provided sociodemographic information, and answered questions about pain, upper extremity function and depression.

Sixty-five percent of [patient satisfaction](#) was attributed to physician empathy, according to the study. Satisfaction was not affected by wait time for an appointment, wait time in the office, time with the surgeon, resident/fellow involvement, whether or not patients were seeking a second opinion, health literacy, or treatment choice.

While good technical skills are essential for hand and [orthopaedic surgery](#), "this study shows that physician empathy is the best opportunity to improve the patient experience," said orthopaedic surgeon and principal investigator David Ring, MD, PhD.

"In prior studies, we've had trouble determining what specifically contributes to patient satisfaction, so a finding that empathy explains 65 percent of the variation in satisfaction is really powerful."

Dr. Ring said surgeons and residents can be coached and practice more effective empathetic communication strategies. It also helps for surgeons to surround themselves with staff who are both naturally skilled and expertly trained in effective communication and customer service. This is especially important as health care reimbursement is increasingly tied to patient satisfaction and patient reported outcomes.

"My patients and I have benefited greatly from my coaching and practice of more effective communication strategies," said Dr. Ring.

The study was recently published in the *Journal of Hand Surgery*.

More information: Mariano E. Menendez et al. Physician Empathy as a Driver of Hand Surgery Patient Satisfaction, *The Journal of Hand Surgery* (2015). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jhsa.2015.06.105](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhsa.2015.06.105)

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