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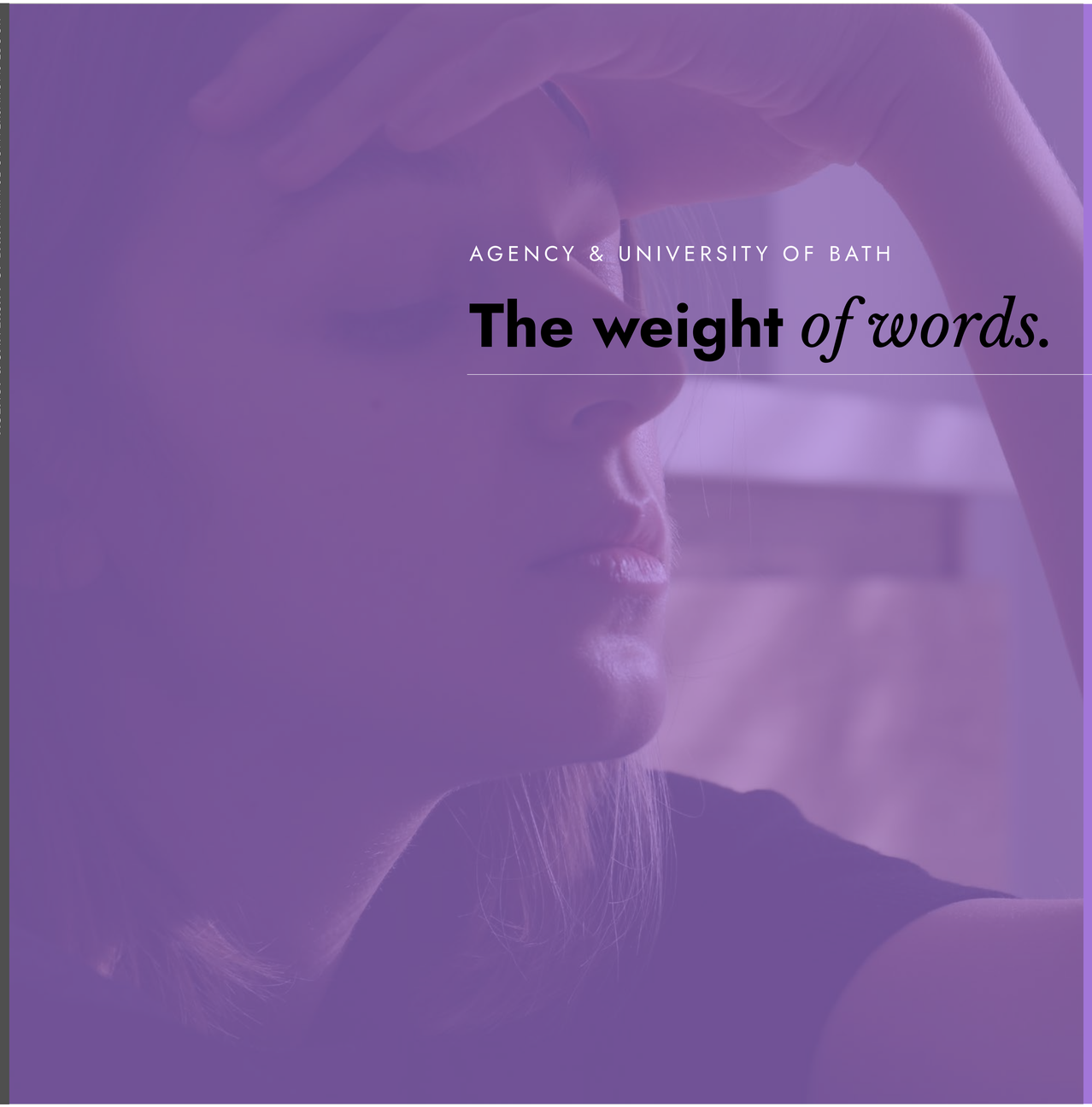
Painful *conversations:*

ENTER

The weight of words

Is improved healthcare communication the key to overcoming the paradox of pain?



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The weight *of words.*

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INTRODUCTION

The weight *of words.*

The Power of Effective Communication in Healthcare

Have you ever wondered what impact your choice of words has on others?

In healthcare, effective communication is the foundation for successful patient-provider relationships, fostering trust, informed decision making and better health outcomes, especially in the context of chronic pain management.

Why does effective communication hold so much power?

For medical marketing managers and healthcare decision-makers (HDMs) who share a common goal of creating strong relationships between providers and individuals living with chronic pain, understanding the role of communication is vital.

At the heart of effective communication lies trust and credibility. When individuals feel reassured and well-informed, trust in their healthcare providers deepens. This trust, in turn, fosters adherence, as individuals are more likely to follow treatment plans, actively engage in their own care and make informed decisions.

By recognising this, we can create transparent and honest communication practices that establish strong patient-provider relationships, ultimately leading to improved health outcomes for those dealing with chronic pain.

Communication is a powerful tool that can eliminate fears, reduce anxiety and empower patients to actively participate in their treatment journey.

People value honesty in their interactions with healthcare professionals. They seek assurance that they are not being lied to, manipulated or made to feel small or patronised.

Honesty breeds trust, and trust is the basis on which the patient-provider relationship is built.

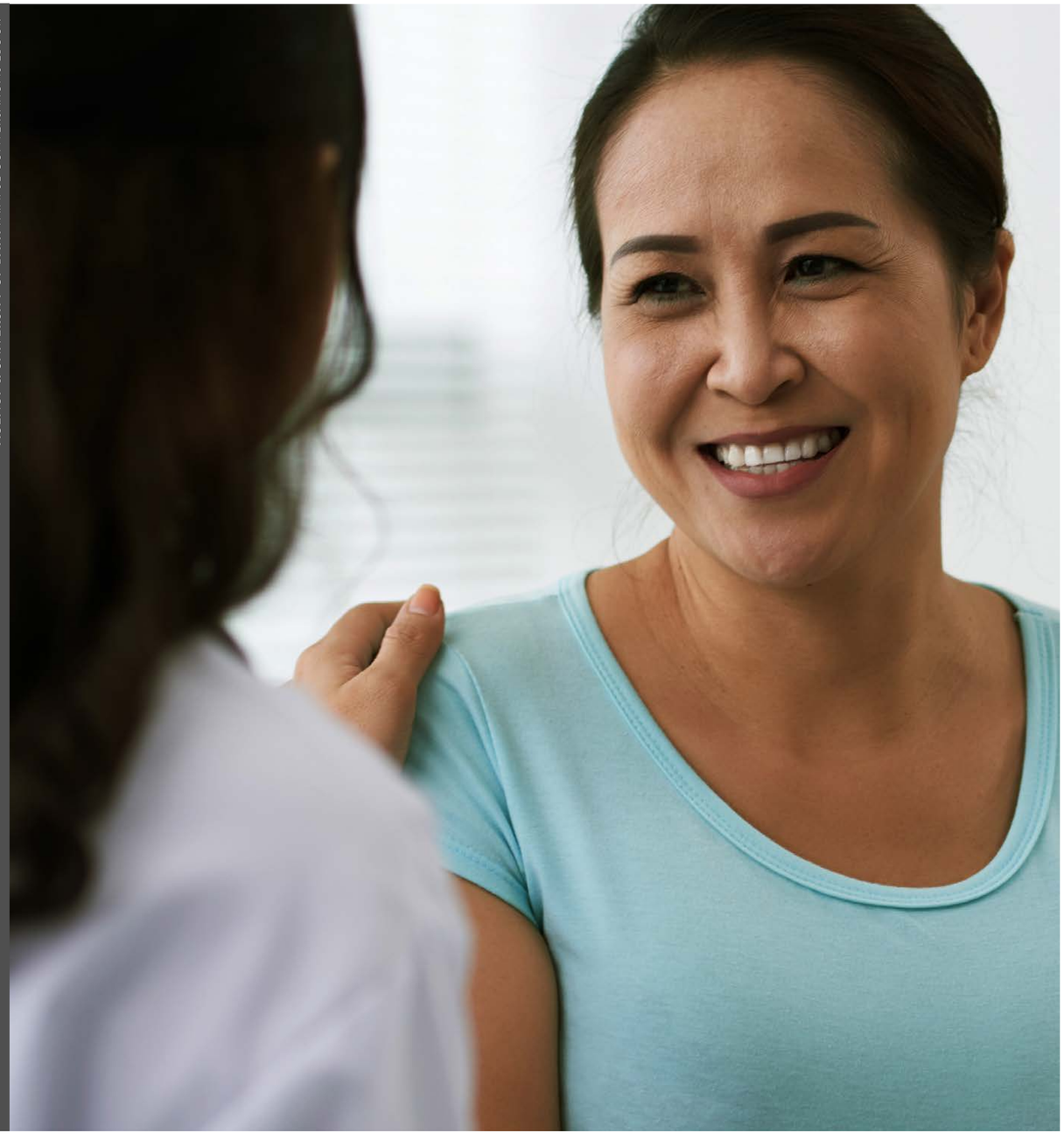
Why do the words we use to address people matter?

Words hold immense power, capable of provoking hope or doubt. It is essential to choose them wisely while ensuring that the information provided is accurate, clear and empathetic to instil trust and informed decision-making.

This article, inspired by the Painful Conversation Series hosted by Professor Christopher Eccleston from The Centre for Pain Research at the University of Bath and Dr Luana Colloca, an expert in Placebo from the University of Maryland in the US, will:

- Explore how communication contributes to the placebo and the nocebo effect.
- Address the current problems facing healthcare communication.
- Provide insight on how to effectively communicate with people with chronic pain.
- Highlight how the future of healthcare communications holds the potential for positive change.

By looking at the relationship between communication and these phenomena, you can gain invaluable insights into strategies and approaches that enact change, shape positive patient experiences and lead to improved health outcomes.



The balance *of communication.*

Finding the right balance between over-explaining and under-explaining is a skill that hinges on understanding the specific needs and concerns of individuals living with chronic pain.

It is important to understand that when and how we communicate can induce biological, psychological and behavioural changes in people, influencing overall outcomes.

The consequences of communication in healthcare can be highlighted by the following factors:

01 The placebo effect

02 The nocebo effect

03 Behaviour

04 Biological explanations

01

THE PLACEBO EFFECT

The power *of belief.*

The placebo effect is a phenomenon in which patients experience therapeutic benefits or symptom relief despite receiving an inactive substance or sham treatment. The placebo effect showcases the powerful role that our beliefs, expectations and perceptions play in influencing our physical well-being.

In a clinical trial comparing traditional vs sham acupuncture as well as clinician communication of positive vs neutral expectations among patients with knee osteoarthritis, no difference was reported between traditional vs sham acupuncture [REF][REF].

However, patients who saw optimistic clinicians trained to communicate a high expectation of benefit reported significantly more satisfaction with treatment and pain improvement than patients who saw clinicians who communicated a neutral expectation of benefit [REF].

Interestingly, a study investigating the relationship between judgments of surgeons' voice tone and their malpractice claims history found that by controlling for content, ratings of higher dominance and lower concern/anxiety in their voice tones could identify surgeons with previous claims compared with those with no claims [REF]. Emphasising a clear association between poor communication and malpractice in surgeons.

These findings demonstrate that relationships between patient-clinician communication and clinical outcomes are established partially by patient perceptions of the visit experience.

When healthcare professionals effectively communicate with patients, providing them with clear and honest information, positive expectations can be fostered, which enhances the placebo effect.

When people are reassured and well-informed about their treatment, they are more likely to develop positive expectations and beliefs in its efficacy. This positive mindset can activate neurobiological pathways and lead to actual physiological changes.

By optimising the placebo effect through effective communication, we can improve patient outcomes, increase treatment adherence, and promote overall well-being.

02

THE NOCEBO EFFECT

The dark side *of communication.*

The nocebo effect is the opposite of the placebo effect, as individuals experience negative side effects or worsened symptoms due to negative expectations or beliefs about a treatment [REF].

In this situation, patients who are not given active treatments may still experience the same side effects as those receiving active treatment solely because they expect them to occur.

This highlights the power of our expectations and perceptions.

The words used during communication with healthcare professionals play a pivotal role in the nocebo effect. Negative or alarmist language can heighten pain perception and intensify the patient's experience.

Additionally, poor communication that leads to fear, anxiety or misunderstandings can inadvertently contribute to the nocebo effect.

The influence of news coverage concerning the human papillomavirus vaccine is a great example of the nocebo effect.

Human papillomavirus vaccines have been proven to be safe and effective in reducing HPV infections that can lead to cervical cancer. However, due to negative media coverage, many people hold negative beliefs relating to the experience of unpleasant side effects following vaccination, affecting uptake [REF].

A study assessing the influence of news coverage on adverse event reporting in response to Gardasil vaccination in New Zealand over a 7.5-year period found that heightened levels of news coverage about the Gardasil vaccine increased adverse event reporting rates (73 reports per 100,000 doses). This was partially driven by increased Google search results [REF], illustrating that the news media plays a fundamental role in disseminating health information and influencing public opinion.

To mitigate its negative consequences, accurate information, clear explanations, and realistic expectations are required.

We should therefore provide transparent and comprehensive information, address concerns and offer reassurance to help minimise anxiety and alleviate the nocebo effect.

Creating an environment of trust and open communication is essential for individuals with chronic pain to receive the accurate information they need.

As discussed previously, when there is trust between healthcare professionals and patients, it fosters a sense of security and confidence in the healthcare journey.

Open communication allows patients to openly express their concerns, ask questions and actively participate in their own care.

By providing accurate information, we can help patients develop realistic expectations and make informed decisions about their treatment options. This promotes better health outcomes as patients are empowered to actively engage in their pain management, adhere to treatment plans, and effectively navigate their healthcare journey.

Establishing trust and open communication is crucial for ensuring that individuals with chronic pain receive the support and information necessary to promote positive expectations and achieve better overall health outcomes.

03

BEHAVIOUR

Why should we stop underestimating the power of language and communication?

Our behaviour is intricately linked to our perception and experience of pain and can be shaped by our thoughts and feelings.

The words we use and the commentary we receive can have a significant impact on our ability to shape our psychological responses to pain.

Negative or distressing language can actually exacerbate pain, while positive commentary has the potential to alleviate it [REF].

Our thoughts and the way we communicate with ourselves and others can play a crucial role in managing and mitigating pain, emphasising the importance of adopting a positive and empowering mindset.

04

BIOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS

To understand pain, it is often valuable to explore the biological explanations alongside the psychological aspects.

Have you ever wondered how your mind and body interact when experiencing pain?

While psychological factors play a significant role in how we perceive and respond to pain, some individuals may seek a deeper understanding of the biological mechanisms involved.

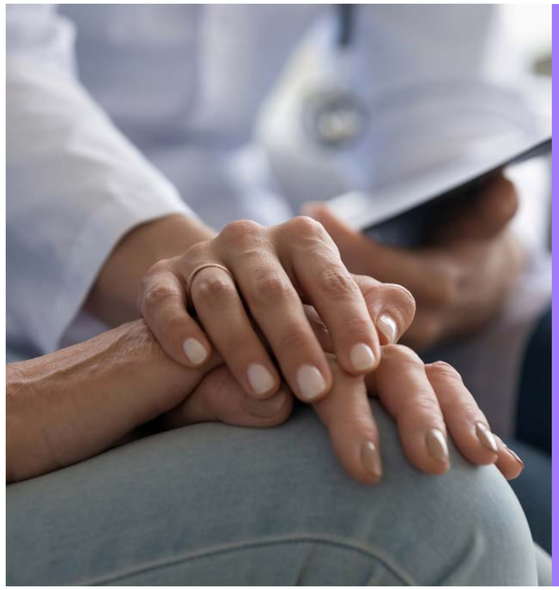
You may find satisfaction in learning about the interplay between their mind, body and the physiological processes underlying their pain experience. By delving into the biological explanations, individuals gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complex nature of pain, which can contribute to a sense of empowerment and informed decision-making regarding their healthcare.

Recognising the importance of both the psychological and biological aspects, healthcare professionals can provide holistic care that addresses the multifaceted nature of pain and meet the need of patients seeking a deeper understanding of their condition.

What are the potential pitfalls?

As people who want to enact a change in mindset, we must be cautious about this approach as over-explaining a concept to a patient may result in information overload and confusion, potentially triggering the nocebo effect.

Therefore, it is crucial that the right balance between over-explaining and under-explaining is struck in order to provide reassurance to people with chronic pain.



What will happen *if nothing changes?*

INCORRECT ASSUMPTIONS:

What are the common misconceptions surrounding the placebo effect?

Many people mistakenly believe that inducing the placebo effect is a simple task. However, harnessing the power of the placebo effect requires a deep understanding of the complex relationship between the mind and body.

Some individuals assume that the placebo effect is solely about deceit, involving the act of misleading individuals into believing they will experience positive outcomes. However, psychotherapy, which is widely recognised as a legitimate form of treatment, leverages similar psychological approaches to provoke positive changes in patients.

But is deception necessary?

In open-label placebo studies, where patients are informed that they will receive either a treatment or a placebo, analgesic effects have been observed, highlighting the importance and influence of communication alone [REF][REF].

This approach eliminates the need for deception, as information is not withheld from the patients.

Why is control important?

Involving patients in the decision-making process and offering them a sense of control allows effective communication and empowers individuals, leading to improved patient outcomes and a strengthened patient-provider relationship.

By acknowledging the broader applications of the placebo effect, we can appreciate its potential as a valuable therapeutic tool beyond notions of deception.

What will happen *if nothing changes?*

LACK OF TRUST:

What factors lead to a lack of trust in the healthcare system and its providers?

Information provided by healthcare professionals can be easily misunderstood by patients or vice versa, resulting in a breakdown of trust. This can leave individuals feeling invalidated and rejected, particularly when they feel their pain or concerns are being dismissed or minimised.

A study aiming to gather insight into patient-provider pain communication challenges found that there are communication barriers between nurses and patients that can affect patient outcomes [REF].

The results revealed that communicating with patients about pain is often inconsistent, subjective and a complex process [REF].

Why should we reassess how we address people?

The results mirror previous studies highlighting perception gaps between a patient's self-report of pain and a provider's assessment of the patient's pain, with the patient reporting greater pain severity and healthcare providers underestimating the patient's pain intensity [REF].

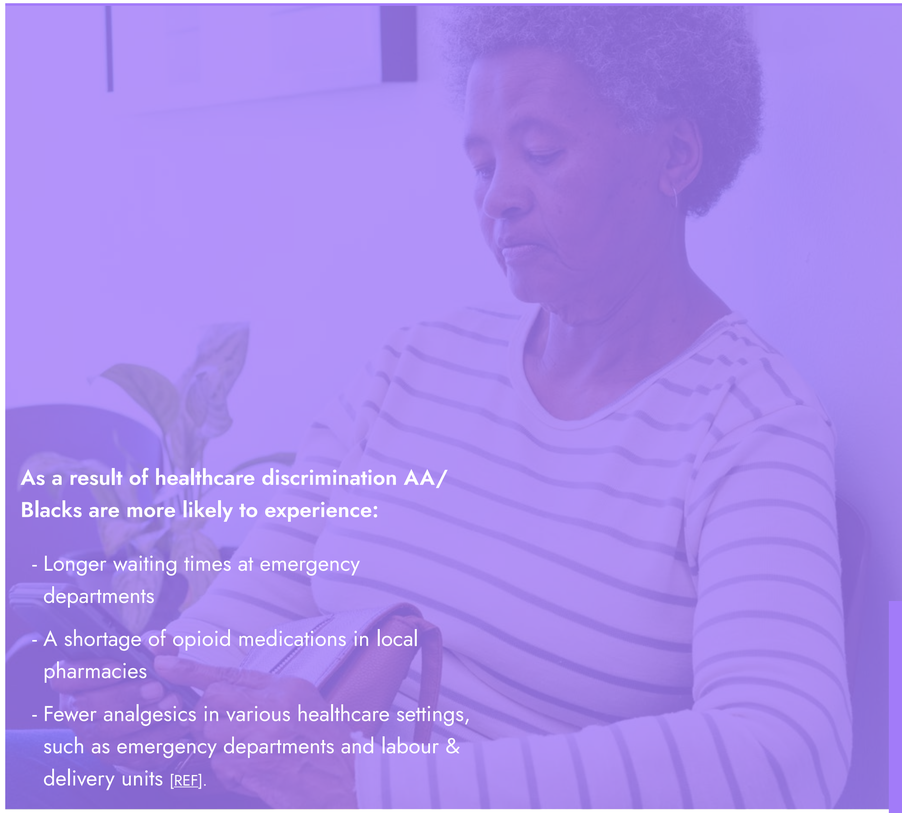
This finding underscores the need for improved communication practices in healthcare, particularly when it comes to discussing pain. It emphasises the importance of addressing these challenges to enhance patient-provider interactions and ultimately improve patient outcomes.

What happens when we encounter bias?

Experiences of healthcare discrimination, whether based on race, gender, or other factors, can erode trust in the system as a whole.

A study analysing the placebo effects in healthy and chronic pain participants who self-identified as either African American/black (AA/black) or white found white participants reported stronger expectations of pain relief, greater conditioning strength effects and placebo effects than their AA/black counterparts [REF].

The study illustrates how pain is unique to each individual and how false beliefs about pain perception between AA/Blacks and Whites may drive biased medical judgments in the healthcare setting [REF].

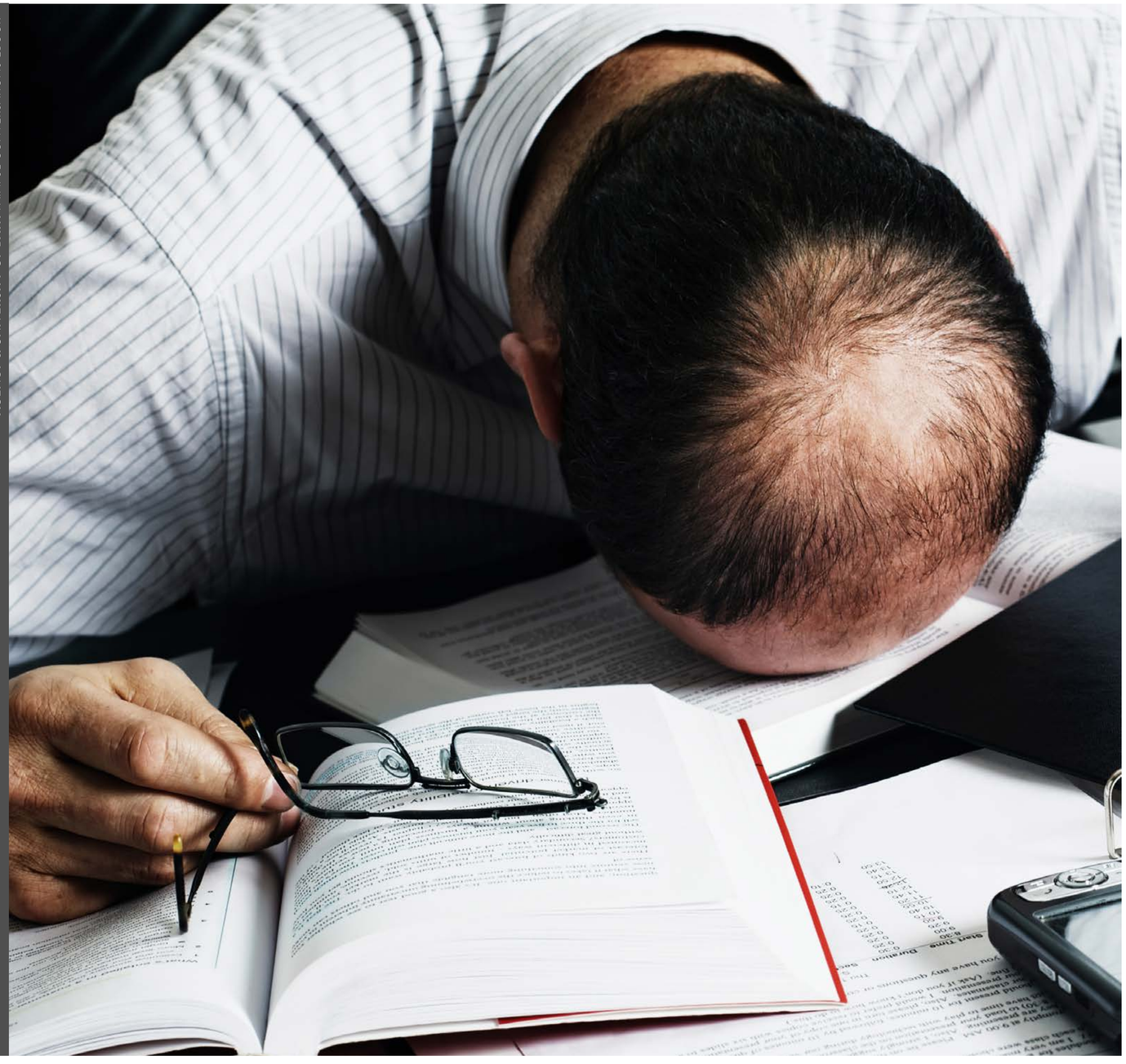


As a result of healthcare discrimination AA/ Blacks are more likely to experience:

- Longer waiting times at emergency departments
- A shortage of opioid medications in local pharmacies
- Fewer analgesics in various healthcare settings, such as emergency departments and labour & delivery units [REF].

When people encounter bias or unequal treatment, their confidence in healthcare providers and institutions can be severely compromised.

Addressing these issues and fostering trust requires us to actively listen, validate patient experiences and work towards eliminating healthcare disparities to rebuild and strengthen the patient-provider relationship.



What will happen *if nothing changes?*

INFORMATION OVERLOAD:

What are the consequences of information overload in healthcare?

Are we doing more harm than good?

While it is important to provide people with relevant information, an excessive amount of information can be overwhelming and counterproductive.

When individuals are bombarded with too much information, there is a risk of feeding false expectations or unrealistic beliefs about their pain or treatment outcomes.

Information overload can also trigger the nocebo effect, amplifying negative expectations and anxieties, leading to worsened symptoms and poor well-being.

To stop these detrimental effects, we must find the balance between providing necessary information and ensuring it is delivered in a digestible way.

By focusing on clarity, relevance and addressing peoples' specific concerns, we can help people navigate the complexities of their healthcare journey without overwhelming them with excessive information.

What needs *to change?*

TONE OF VOICE:

The tone of voice we use in healthcare communication is a crucial element that needs to change. When we talk to someone, it triggers biological, psychological and behavioural changes within them.

It is essential to recognise that people deeply appreciate honesty and dislike being deceived or made to feel inferior or belittled.

Effective communication goes beyond conveying information; it involves framing discussions correctly and using the right words.

For instance, consider the context of injections. When individuals are told they will experience a "sting" or "sharp pain" without being provided with a positive insight like "this is temporary,"their perception of pain or condition can worsen, triggering the nocebo effect. This emphasises the importance of reassurance in healthcare interactions.

How can words affect us emotionally?

Words used in communication can also cause emotional suffering, triggering feelings of rejection, invalidation, and isolation. The experience of being isolated with pain can intensify hyper fixation, causing individuals to focus more on their pain, heightening their suffering.

Effective communication requires careful consideration of the words we choose to ensure they convey empathy, understanding, and support. It is crucial to acknowledge that communication has the power to both harm and heal.

By incorporating honest and open communication into our conversations, validating people's experiences, and creating an alliance with them, we can reduce distress and improve painful situations [REF]. For example, saying, "It's going to be painful, but we are doing X, Y, Z to make the pain tolerable," can offer both the honesty and reassurance that people seek.

Ultimately, in healthcare communication, reassessment of tone of voice and word choice is vital to cultivate trust, enhance the patient experience and ensure positive health outcomes.

Bringing *people together.*

WHY SHOULD COLLABORATION BE ENCOURAGED?

Bringing people together is crucial for progress and innovation, particularly in breaking down the barriers that have been created between science, art, and philosophy in our society.

In order to move forward, it is essential that we strive to eliminate these barriers and encourage interdisciplinary collaboration.

Scientists, in particular, need to adopt a more open-minded approach and consider perspectives from other disciplines. Evidence suggests that being around people who are different from us makes us more creative, more diligent and harder working [REF], with interdisciplinary collaboration helping to identify gaps in knowledge and areas for further research [REF].

By bringing together scientists, artists and philosophers, we can create a meaningful exchange of ideas and foster a mutual understanding that transcends disciplinary boundaries, leading to fresh perspectives, innovative solutions, and a deeper understanding of complex issues.

By creating spaces for discussions and actively seeking out diverse viewpoints, we can adopt mutual understanding and create a shared vision for progress, even when tackling difficult or uncomfortable topics.

The merging of disciplines and thinking outside the box allows for greater creativity and expands the possibilities for transformative breakthroughs.

By addressing and openly discussing challenging topics, we can promote empathy, understanding and ultimately find better solutions.

Collaboration and bringing people together are key to dismantling barriers, expanding our perspectives, and creating a more inclusive and transformative society.

How can we *enact this change?*

RAISING AWARENESS:

Raising awareness among healthcare services and medical device providers, for example, about the importance of effective communication pre-intervention or prescription, is crucial for improving patient outcomes.

Effective communication at this stage sets the foundation for a positive patient-provider relationship and enhances patient understanding. Healthcare services and medical device providers play a vital role in shaping the communication strategies employed by healthcare professionals.

By increasing their awareness of the impact of effective communication, they can prioritise and advocate for practices that promote patient-centred care, informed decision-making and better treatment outcomes.

How can this be achieved?

Conducting workshops on the state of pain management and the importance of the consent of patients can provide valuable insights and promote an understanding of the challenges faced by individuals with chronic pain.

Organising workshops and training programs focused on effective communication strategies can equip healthcare professionals with the necessary tools to address chronic pain and build strong patient-provider relationships.

Publishing relevant content on platforms like LinkedIn can also help distribute knowledge and promote best practices in healthcare communication. These resources will ultimately support healthcare professionals in effectively engaging with patients and providing them with the information they need to make informed choices about their healthcare.

DISCUSSIONS WITH PATIENTS:

Striking the right balance between over-explaining and under-explaining is crucial to ensure that information is effectively conveyed to the target audience.

Patients value honesty, clarity and reassurance, and it is important to acknowledge that pain is a personal experience that goes beyond the scientific aspects of treatment [REF].

By actively listening to patients and tailoring communication to their individual needs, we can create trust and better understanding.

COLLABORATION:

Social interaction and meaningful conversations play vital roles in improving understanding and empathy. For best practice, we should actively engage in research on target audiences, including patients, to gain insights into their unique perspectives and needs.

Collaborations and discussions with experts from diverse fields, such as scientists, artists and philosophers, can offer fresh perspectives and lead to innovative approaches in healthcare communication.

By promoting interdisciplinary collaboration, we can create a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of pain and its management.

How can we *enact this change?*

MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS:

Marketing communications should accurately reflect the nature of pain and its treatment. It is essential to avoid creating unrealistic expectations that may negatively impact patient outcomes.

Clear and transparent messaging can help set realistic expectations and build trust between healthcare providers and patients. By aligning marketing communications with the realities of pain management, accurate information can be promoted, misconceptions can be removed, and the overall effectiveness of healthcare communication can be enhanced.

By implementing these strategies, we can begin to enact meaningful change in healthcare communications, promoting effective and compassionate care for individuals with chronic pain.

THE FUTURE

The significance *of effective communications.*

In this article, we aim to emphasise the significance of effective communication in healthcare and highlight the potential impact it has on patient outcomes.

We have discussed the placebo and nocebo effects, illustrating how communication can shape peoples' expectations and experiences. We have identified barriers such as lack of trust, information overload and the need for reassessment of tone of voice. These challenges can undermine the patient-provider relationship, hinder informed decision-making, and contribute to negative health outcomes.

By addressing these problems head-on by raising awareness, fostering collaboration and promoting transparent communication, we can bridge these gaps and create a healthcare environment that prioritises trust, control and informed decision-making.

By actively working towards better communication practices, we can elevate the standard of healthcare delivery and provide a future encompassing:

POSITIVE OUTCOMES:

Effective communication has the power to foster trust, instil confidence and create a supportive environment.

How can this help you?

When we communicate in a reassuring and empathetic manner, people are more likely to have positive expectations, leading to improved treatment outcomes [REF]. By highlighting clear and compassionate communication, we can enhance patient experiences and promote better health outcomes.

THE FUTURE

The significance *of effective communications.*

REDUCING THE NOCEBO EFFECT:

The nocebo effect, where negative expectations lead to adverse outcomes, can be mitigated through effective healthcare communication. We all have a part to play in providing accurate and clear information about treatments, potential side effects, and realistic expectations.

The PSY-HEART-I trial illustrated that brief expectation-focused psychological intervention (EXPECT) prior to heart surgery improved disability and quality of life six months after coronary artery bypass graft surgery (CABG) [REF].

EXPECT significantly reduced stress-associated biomarkers (i.e., adrenaline) after surgery and reduced inflammation after surgery and six months after surgery compared with the standard of care [REF].

By addressing fears, concerns and misconceptions, we can help minimise unnecessary harm, empower patients and improve treatment outcomes.

ESTABLISHING TRUST AND CREDIBILITY:

Why is trust the foundation of effective healthcare communication?

When patients feel reassured and well-informed, they are more likely to trust their healthcare providers, follow treatment plans and actively engage in their own care.

How can we establish trust?

Moving forward, we should prioritise transparent and honest communication practices to establish strong patient-provider relationships.

By building trust and credibility, we can create a supportive environment that facilitates open dialogue and collaboration.

PROMOTION OF INFORMED-DECISION MAKING:

Why is informed decision-making crucial for patient-centred care?

People have the right to be informed about their health conditions, treatment options and the associated risks and benefits.

Clear and unbiased communication enables individuals to make informed decisions about their healthcare.

What are the next steps?

Together we should ensure that healthcare professionals are trained to effectively communicate complex medical information in a manner that is understandable to patients.

By promoting informed decision-making, we empower individuals to actively participate in their healthcare journey.

The future of healthcare communications holds immense potential for positive change. By embracing effective communication strategies, medical marketing managers and HDMs can foster trust, reduce the nocebo effect, establish strong patient-provider relationships and promote informed decision-making.

These advancements will enhance trust, empower individuals with a greater sense of control and enable informed decision-making.

Your *next steps.*

If you would like to hear more on the topic of pain research, contact Dr Luana Colloca and Professor Christopher Eccleston.

Need help with communicating with patients? Get in touch with AGENCY to see how we can help you enhance trust, empower individuals with a greater sense of control and enable informed decision-making.

Get in touch now at **www.agencybristol.com**

Dr Luana Colloca

DR LUANA COLLOCA - BIOGRAPHY:

Dr. Luana Colloca, born and raised in Italy, embarked on a remarkable journey that led her to become a distinguished physician-scientist with a profound impact on the field of neuroscience and pain modulation.

During her formative years as an MD student at the University Magna Graecia of Catanzaro School of Medicine in Italy, Dr. Colloca discovered her passion for neuroscience. This revelation occurred while attending the course of neurophysiology, sparking a keen interest that would shape her future endeavours. Fuelled by this newfound fascination, she decided to blend her medical expertise with a commitment to research, setting the stage for her dual role as a physician and scientist.

Her academic achievements include an MD, a PhD in Neuroscience from the University of Turin Medical School in Italy, and a master's degree in Neuroethics from the same institution. However, her journey was not without challenges. Facing difficulties securing a position in academia in Italy, Dr. Colloca persevered, eventually undertaking post-doctoral training at the Brain Imaging Centre at the prestigious Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Sweden. This opportunity was made possible through the IASP Collaborative Research grant from the International Association for the Study of Pain.

Following this international experience, Dr. Colloca spent five years as a senior research fellow at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, further honing her skills and contributing to the advancement of knowledge in her field. Eventually, she found her place at the University of Maryland School of Nursing and School of Medicine in Baltimore, where she currently serves as a full-time Professor and holds the UMB Named Inaugural MPower Professorship award.

In her role as an MPower Distinguished Professor, Dr. Colloca also directs the Placebo Beyond Opinions Centre, where her team conducts groundbreaking research on human pain modulation. Her NIH-funded program explores the intricate interplay of neurobehavioural and genetic factors in expectancy-induced analgesia, particularly in patients suffering from chronic pain.

Dr. Colloca's research contributions have significantly impacted the understanding of psycho-neurobiological bases for pain modulation in humans. Her multifaceted approach, integrating psycho-pharmacological, neurobiological, and behavioural perspectives, has garnered international recognition. Her work has been published in esteemed journals such as Biological Psychiatry, Pain, JAMA, NEJM, and Lancet Neurology.

The profound impact of Dr. Colloca's research is evidenced by her impressive citation rate and over 230 invited lectures. Her work has reached global audiences and has been featured in renowned publications and media outlets, including National Geographic, The New Scientist, Nature, Washington Post, Science Daily, and more.

In addition to her research accolades, Dr. Colloca has received prestigious awards such as the Dubner Award and Patrick Wall International Award from the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP). She actively contributes to the field through leadership roles in international organisations like IASP and the Society for Interdisciplinary Placebo Studies (SIPS). Locally, she serves as the CTSA TL1 Program Director at the University of Maryland and holds a significant editorial role as a Section Editor for PAIN and PAIN Reports journals.

Dr. Luana Colloca's journey exemplifies resilience, dedication, and a relentless pursuit of knowledge in the realm of neuroscience and pain modulation, leaving an indelible mark on the scientific community.

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Contact *us:*

Michael Colling-Tuck
AGENCY Medical Marketing
mct@agency-bristol.com

Professor Christopher Eccleston
University of Bath
https://linktr.ee/ChristopherEccleston