Part of the patient’s healing process following an unexpected outcome necessitates physician involvement by facilitating treatment to promote physical healing. Patients also report an associated financial burden.

In addition, the patient’s emotional response to the complication should be recognized. Patients and their families often have a variety of emotions that surface after an unexpected outcome such as fear, anger, frustration, and loss of control. Compassionate care includes responding to these emotional responses to effectively facilitate the patient’s entire healing process.

A recent article from Health Affairs (September 2011) cited a survey of 800 patients and 510 physicians, which concluded that “Patients and physicians alike agreed that health outcomes depend not only on the medical skills and knowledge of the physician, but also on his or her effective communication and emotional support.”

From the Patient’s Perspective Recently, we received the following comment from a patient:

“The doctor was wonderful in how he handled this unexpected outcome. His bedside manner is wonderful. He even called me at home and on the weekend to check on how I was doing. He was truly compassionate and I felt he was truly sorry.”

This feedback shows that the patient felt genuine concern and caring from his or her physician, which helps address
the emotional impact of an unanticipated outcome. The physician demonstrates compassion by verbally expressing empathy, investing time, and through continued involvement.

Conversely, some comments alert us to a patient’s belief that the physician doesn’t care, typically occurring when there is no continued communication after an unexpected outcome. “We were very disappointed that it took one year to be able to sit down with the physicians and discuss this matter. That made us feel that there wasn’t much concern on the doctors’ part, especially after being told that it was impossible to sit down with a doctor to discuss this event.”

Additional comments such as, “I haven’t heard from him (the doctor) since the surgery” and “I only saw him once after the bowel perforation” indicate that patients expect continued involvement from their physicians even if other health care providers have assumed primary care.

Expressing empathy and concern often requires ongoing interaction with follow-up visits and phone conversations. Acknowledging the patient’s response to an unexpected outcome and promoting healing in all respects takes time. Empathetic listening and responding allows the patient to express his or her feelings and facilitates understanding between the provider and patient. In addition, this promotes trust and strengthens the physician/patient relationship.

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