Stanford Health Communication Initiative
Transforming Conversations with Patients and the Public

The Stanford Health Communication Initiative is transforming health care by optimizing the way health-care providers share information with patients and the public. It draws upon the rich knowledge of experts from across Stanford University, including physicians, writers, psychologists, speech coaches, and filmmakers. Together, we are pioneering effective ways to discuss complex medical issues, build trust and debunk health-care myths to improve physicians’ ability to forge respectful, trusting relationships with patients and the public.

The Stanford Health Communication Initiative brings the same peerless level of scientific rigor to this endeavor as is devoted to laboratory research and clinical trials. Besides improving one-on-one doctor-patient communication, the initiative focuses on helping medical professionals share valid, reliable health-care information with the public through public forums, including print, broadcast, and social media.

The initiative is developing seminars for medical students and Stanford University faculty and providing continuing education courses to health-care professionals across the United States. We are spearheading multidisciplinary research that focuses on optimizing the art and science of effective health-care communication and disseminates these innovative approaches through scholarly publications and symposia. These efforts have the potential to extend improved health care and compliance from an individual patient’s experience to the health of our nation.

The initiative builds upon the strengths of our Advancing Communication Excellence at Stanford (ACES) workshops, which have already trained more than 700 clinicians in the basics of effective, empathetic communication techniques. The initiative expands this curriculum through workshops tailored for specific audiences, including physicians, nurses, and other health-care professionals in critical and intensive care medicine, oncology, emergency medicine, palliative care, and surgical departments. The Stanford Health Communication Initiative enhances the workshop experience by incorporating improvisation and storytelling techniques.

What are the Big Issues?
We are facing misrepresentations of health information, dissatisfied patients, poor health outcomes, and rising rates of physician burnout and suicide. Modern day health-care vulnerabilities cannot be managed exclusively with technology. There is a powerful and underused tool for improving patient satisfaction and health outcomes, enhancing the wellbeing of physicians, and stopping the spread of erroneous health guidance—a powerful intervention with few side effects.

It is not a new drug, device, or app: the extraordinarily powerful tool is effective, compelling, meaningful health communication. It is at the heart of every successful interaction in medicine, and capable of challenging anti-science and the spread of misinformation and fear.

While billions of dollars are spent on developing new medications and technology, very few resources have been invested in discovering and developing the most successful ways to communicate with individual patients and the public about new treatments and threats to global public health. Training physicians to engage in nuanced conversations with their patients has been ignored despite growing evidence that meaningful communication supports the wellbeing of the patient and the provider.

The campaign against medical misinformation and fearful ignorance is one of the Stanford Health Communication Initiative’s core missions. As anti-science movements grow and threaten public health and safety, the initiative is partnering with journalism schools and academic groups to study the spread of spurious health-care claims and limit their impact.
**Developing Communication Skills**

Physicians are frequently rushed and may interrupt patients before they finish sharing information that can be vital for an accurate diagnosis or an effective treatment plan. Besides compromising the quality of care and eroding trust between patients and their doctors, this lack of finesse has financial consequences. Studies show that in most malpractice suits, one of the major issues is communication breakdown. Liability payments decreased significantly after physician communication training.

The Stanford Health Communication Initiative will teach health-care professionals the fundamental skills essential for becoming excellent communicators, including:

- **Deep listening:** Participants learn how to create physical and emotional space for patients to talk without interruption. They practice summarizing their understanding of what patients say and invite them to elaborate or correct any errors in the doctor’s perceptions. They are taught to take time to recognize and understand the emotions underlying a patient’s words or body language, thereby facilitating trust and transforming the patient-provider relationship.

- **Navigating complexity:** The initiative teaches health-care professionals effective methods for avoiding excessive jargon, appropriately setting the complexity of the conversation at a level the patient (and their family) can understand. Participants learn techniques for guiding patients as they sort through online information. They are shown how to address conflicting viewpoints head-on, clearly outline the pros and cons of various options, and make thoughtful recommendations tailored to a patient’s personal values and goals.

- **Building partnerships:** Lack of patient compliance with a “treatment plan”—such as taking prescribed medication, exercising, or eating healthier foods—is a huge challenge in health care. Research demonstrates that patients are much more likely to follow a doctor’s orders if their dialogue has been open, free, compassionate, and empathetic. Participants learn the communication tools to build respectful relationships with patients and enable them to work together as a team.

Busy health-care professionals may worry that these approaches are time-consuming and will interfere with productivity. Effective health communication actually saves time, studies show, allowing providers to accomplish more during each visit, while increasing satisfaction for the patient and health-care provider. For example, one of the most common mistakes in health communication occurs when providers present information in a confusing manner. If they neglect to clarify a patient’s understanding of new material when it is first presented, patients will keep circling back to points that remain confusing to them. By contrast, providers who meet patients at their comprehension level and build stepwise upon that foundation are making more efficient use of their time together, building rapport, and setting the stage for a successful treatment plan.

**Training Excellent Public Communicators**

Effective communication also enables health-care professionals to present complex information in a readily accessible manner to broader audiences. Many scientific and medical experts have inadequate training in how to tailor their communications for public audiences and the media. This type of communication and education is critical for improving public health attitudes, compliance and support for successful public policy. For example, the human papilloma virus (HPV) vaccine is a safe, effective intervention with the potential to significantly reduce cervical cancer deaths. HPV is a sexually transmitted disease, and initial guidelines recommended that all girls and boys receive vaccination by middle school to prevent HPV infection. In the United States, this ignited controversy concerning whether the vaccine would encourage young people to become sexually active, and that decreased compliance. Subsequent public health campaigns reframed the vaccine as a way to prevent cancer and compliance is slowly improving.

Health-care messaging is not well understood and is frequently not well-planned or optimally presented. Good data in and of itself is not enough: how experts present their information can be as important and impactful as the quality of their research. The initiative seeks to address this vulnerability. It trains medical and scientific experts to use simple, direct language tailored to a specific audience, and to communicate two or three key ideas. For
controversial issues, they learn to deal with other points of view and respond constructively in order to move the discussion forward. The initiative will develop novel approaches that help scientific experts become expert public communicators. These techniques and their impact will be evaluated to provide evidence-based communication training that makes a measurable and meaningful difference to patient care and public health.

Opportunity for Partnership

Stanford University is uniquely positioned to lead the emerging field of health-care communication. There are very few centers in the country focused on this new discipline, which has the potential to greatly improve patient care and public health. Besides its extraordinary biomedical sciences faculty, the Stanford Health Communication Initiative includes communications experts in fields as wide-ranging as business, theater, psychology, and journalism. Together they will study the science of health communication—piloting, evaluating, refining, and disseminating the most effective ways to talk about complex medical issues. These discoveries will improve patient-physician relationships and patient outcomes, ultimately transforming the health of the nation. We invite you to join us in this exciting effort.

Initiative Executive Director

Jonathan S. Berek, MD, MMS, is the Laurie Kraus Lacob Professor at Stanford University School of Medicine, and a past fellow in the Stanford Distinguished Careers Institute. Dr. Berek is the executive director of the Stanford Health Communication Initiative (SHCI), within the Stanford Center for Health Education (SCHE), in the Stanford Office of the Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning (VPTL). He is an internationally renowned gynecologic oncologist and cancer researcher. The Stanford Health Communication Initiative, also known as Stanford HealthCom, promotes educational and research programs in effective medical communication and health media. Jointly sponsored by the Stanford Department of Communication and the Stanford Center for Health Communication. Dr. Berek conducts programs in effective and compassionate medical communication and directs documentary films on a variety of medical topics, especially those highlighting patients’ experiences. The initiative supports the creation of many of his film production and directorial projects.

Dr. Berek serves as senior advisor at the Stanford Cancer Institute and founding director at the Stanford Women's Cancer Center. As an author and editor, Dr. Berek has published eight books, more than 300 peer-reviewed scientific manuscripts, and an equal number of book chapters and monographs. He received his undergraduate degree in Theatre Arts and English Literature and a Master of Medical Sciences from Brown University. After earning his MD from Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, he completed his residency at the Harvard Medical School, Brigham & Women’s Hospital. Dr. Berek has received numerous awards and accolades for his work as a cancer physician and surgeon, cancer researcher, author, and editor.
Director of Research and Education

Seema Yasmin, MD, an Emmy Award-winning journalist, author, and public health expert, joined Stanford University as the director of Research and Education Programs in the Stanford Health Communication Initiative (SHCI), within the Stanford Center for Health Education (SCHE), in the Office of the Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning (VPTL). Dr. Yasmin received her medical training at the University of Cambridge and studied journalism at the University of Toronto. She served as an officer in the Epidemic Intelligence Service at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), where she investigated disease outbreaks around the world and was principal investigator on a number of epidemiologic studies at the CDC.

In 2017, Dr. Yasmin was selected as a John S. Knight Fellow in Journalism at Stanford University where she taught global health storytelling in the School of Medicine. Previously, she was a science writer at The Dallas Morning News, medical analyst for CNN, and professor of public health at the University of Texas at Dallas. Dr. Yasmin was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in breaking news in 2017 and the recipient of two grants from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. Her writing earned awards and residencies from the Mid-Atlantic Arts Council, Hedgebrook, the Millay Colony for the Arts, and others. Her first book, The Impatient Dr. Lange (Johns Hopkins University Press, July 2018), is the biography of an AIDS doctor killed on Malaysia Airlines flight MH17. Her second book, Debunked! Pseudoscience, Medical Myths and Why They Persist, is forthcoming in July 2019. Dr. Yasmin’s expertise in medicine, epidemics, journalism, and science communication earned her positions at The Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues, the Aspen Institute, and the Skoll Foundation.