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On the Importance of Listening

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Last evening, my housemate was describing some frustrations she was having with the computer network in our home. A geek wanna-be, every time she took a breath, I interjected some brilliant (in my own mind) action that could solve the problem. She finally looked at me in frustration and said, "Are you listening to me?"

Like most people in America, I'm guilty of mistaking listening for "waiting for my turn to talk." In a 1984 study published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, Beekman and Frankel looked at the effects of physician behavior on the collection of data. In their analysis, they found that when patients started describing the problem that brought them in for treatment, the first interruption by the physician occurred an average of 18 seconds after the patient began speaking.

Donald Berwick MD, PhD, CEO of the Center for Healthcare Improvement, said in a recent keynote speech, "Most patients will give you ninety percent of the information you need to diagnose and treat them if you'll just shut up and listen."

Failure to listen in the clinical setting can have horrible consequences. A friend of mine had difficulty swallowing, along with a few other symptoms. For more than two years, her physician jumped on the first thing she said without listening to the rest of her symptoms. As a result, her undiagnosed cancer spread throughout her 34-year-old body. She survived, despite her misdiagnosis, after 11 major surgeries, chemo and radiation.

Emergency service leaders need to listen as much as, if not more than, paramedics do. Last fall, an EMS system manager interrupted a paramedic who was starting to explain why he didn't transport a drunk indigestion patient who subsequently, according to the manager, "woke up dead in his bed the next morning." The interruption made the paramedic defensive, and he lost his train of thought. It didn't matter anyway because his manager had already quit listening and fired the medic on the spot. The QI manager at the service did a thorough investigation and found that while some mistakes were made, there were solid rational reasons for the non-transport. The medic got his job back on appeal.

One of the most difficult, but most useful, practices a leader can add to his/her skill set is to pause. Allow a full two-second gap after someone stops speaking before you respond or say anything. Chances are that the other person will be in a better position to hear your response and you'll have learned something that you'd have otherwise missed. I've heard that this advice can work at home, as well. At least my ex-wife seems to think so.

More from Mike can be found on www.emsleader.com.

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