

NTU, TTSH team up to improve doctor-patient communication

Conversation analysis used to assess impact of certain verbal and non-verbal exchanges

Rei Kurohi

For doctors and other medical professionals, interacting with patients can sometimes be more of an art than a science. Communicating effectively and empathetically requires experience, not just medical knowledge.

A new joint study by researchers from the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and clinicians from Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) aims to offer a novel approach to improve the human dimension of healthcare – in the form of conversation analysis (CA).

The study was led by Professor Luke Kang Kwong Kapathy and Assistant Professor Lim Ni Eng from the NTU School of Humanities in collaboration with Adjunct Assis-



Left: Professor Luke Kang Kwong Kapathy (far left) and Assistant Professor Lim Ni Eng (centre) from NTU led the study in collaboration with Adjunct Assistant Professor Png Keng Siang from TTSH.

Above: The study examines footage of real patients in authentic consultations. The video footage is processed to remove any personally identifiable information. PHOTOS: NTU/TTSH, NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

tant Professor Png Keng Siang, a senior consultant at TTSH's urology department.

CA is a method of studying social interactions by analysing video footage which is transcribed verbatim. It is used in many disciplines like

sociolinguistics and anthropology.

From mid-2016 to mid-2018, 150 first-visit consultations at TTSH urology clinics were filmed with the written consent of the patients. The footage was processed to remove personally identifiable information.

These recordings were then transcribed, scrutinised and analysed, said Prof Luke yesterday during a media briefing at TTSH.

Both verbal and non-verbal interactions in the transcripts and footage were analysed – a process

that is ongoing – to determine how both the doctor and patient understood their interactions.

The researchers identified recurring scenarios. For example, a doctor would usually recommend a battery of diagnostic tests to deter-

mine the cause of a symptom such as the presence of blood in urine.

The researchers found that it was common for patients to express fear or apprehension towards certain procedures. This might be reflected in questions about whether the procedure will hurt, or in non-verbal cues like silence or body language.

By identifying the context of a given interaction and any instances of misunderstanding, the researchers also noted specific points at which doctors could improve their communication with patients or their families and caregivers.

Prof Lim said: "We found that when the doctors pick up on these concerns or fears, they usually try to give the patients even more information, for example, by talking about anaesthetics or risks, or by describing the procedure in detail, but this does not reassure them. The patients are looking for empathy, not just information."

Instead, the doctor could describe how previous patients responded positively to the procedure, he added.

The method used in communication training for medical students and doctors in all three medical schools here typically involves an actor role-playing as a patient in a scripted, simulated scenario.

The CA technique can complement this process and can yield richer insights compared with statistics, surveys or retrospective interviews now used in health communication studies, the team said.

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Security guard gets jail, cane for sex act on drunk man

Shaffiq Alkhatib

A male security guard on duty at Suntec City performed oral sex on a drunk man after finding him collapsed on the floor of a toilet.

A court heard that Low Chih Kin, 35, took advantage of the 36-year-old lying motionless after a heavy drinking session.

Low was sentenced to six years' jail and three strokes of the cane yesterday after pleading guilty to one count of performing a non-consensual sexual act.

Two molestation charges involving the same man were taken into consideration during sentencing.

The court heard that the victim – an assistant building manager with an asset management firm – had been drinking with colleagues at the mall and convention centre on May 6 last year.

He went to a toilet on the ground floor at about 1am and ended up lying on the floor, where he remained motionless. His wife called him at around 2.45am as he still had not returned home.

Deputy Public Prosecutor Eunice Lau said: "The victim, who was still lying on the toilet floor at the time, was able to make out that his handphone was ringing, and surmised that his wife must have been trying to reach him."

"However, due to his level of intoxication, the victim was unable to open his eyes – let alone move his hand to answer his handphone – to respond to the calls."

Low went to the toilet about 15 minutes later when he saw the man lying on his side at its entrance. Feeling sexually aroused, he performed oral sex on the man, who was unable to open his eyes or fight off the security guard.

However, he could feel Low committing the offence, the court heard.

Low later stopped and a closed circuit television (CCTV) camera caught him leaving the area.

The victim, who cannot be named for legal reasons, finally answered his wife's call at around 3.15am and she rushed to Suntec City to help him.

Despite his condition, the man managed to tell her that he had been sexually assaulted.

She alerted the police and her husband was taken to Tan Tock Seng Hospital. The court heard that Low was traced through CCTV footage and arrested.

For committing the non-consensual sexual act on the man, he could have been jailed for up to 20 years and fined or caned.

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