

OPINION ARTICLE

Why Is Communication Important in Dermatology?

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One of the defining features of modern society is the cult of image. This image, however, is usually more a matter of perception than of reality. We value things for what we know about them, and this knowledge comes to us in large measure through the mass media. McLuhan was not exaggerating when he said that the medium is the message. Even so, the importance of communication is often questioned. The temptation to close oneself off in a professional bubble strikes all too often. Some specialists think that only those who share their level of knowledge are in a position to evaluate their expertise adequately. And for this reason they strive for the recognition of their professional colleagues. This is very important, but at the same time we must not lose sight of the fact that the object and beneficiary of this expertise is society itself.

Whether we like it or not, society today operates as a market. As dermatologists we have to practice in that market, representing ourselves as the best prepared skin care professionals. We cannot do this without the help of the media, but the relationship between medical specialists and media professionals is not without difficulties. Health professionals often tend to think that journalists are unprepared to transmit their knowledge to the public in an appropriate way, and this generates a lack of trust that, in turn, ends by generating antipathy.

Better communication requires mutual understanding between dermatologists and journalists based on recognition of each other's professional qualifications. Dermatologists need to understand that they are not speaking to their professional colleagues, but to the general public. For this reason, they must make an effort to choose issues of interest that are accessible to the average person, limiting technical jargon as much as possible, however useful it may be in the context of their own specialty. They need to recognize that journalists are experts trained in popularizing scientific knowledge and disseminating it in a clear and accessible way.

Good personal relationships help a great deal. Dermatologists should rely on colleagues known to be good at dealing with journalists, and try to learn from them. Without giving others the feeling that they are being discriminated against, we should choose the media professionals best positioned by virtue of their superior knowledge and cultivate them, gradually transforming them into our spokespersons.

If effective communication is now recognized as an important task, in our specialty it is fundamental. We should not forget that dermatology is intimately connected with image. This is a market particularly targeted by unscrupulous practitioners who lack adequate scientific training and are motivated primarily by greed.

Although at first glance it may seem obvious that persons seeking the best skin care available would not hesitate to choose a specialist whose expertise is guaranteed by long years of study over an undocumented charlatan, or a product whose value has been demonstrated through investment in research over a supposedly miraculous placebo, but unfortunately in practice this is not always the case. Aware of the weakness of their arguments, these purveyors of smoke and mirrors rely on deceptive advertising. The disasters we often find ourselves obliged to handle in our practice constitute reliable proof that their technique works.

In order to combat these quacks effectively, we need to be able to rely on journalists as skilled in truthful reporting as others are in spreading half-truths and even outright falsehoods. Just as with good friends, journalists who can be made to understand what is at stake here are worth their weight in gold. In these circumstances, the presence of dermatology in the media is beneficial, because such media professionals know how to choose and report the news stories of greatest interest to the public.

Like Caesar's wife, who had to be above suspicion, dermatologists must come to be perceived by society as the best option for skin care. This goal cannot be achieved through scientific argument, however extensive and well founded, but through a communications policy that makes appropriate use of media professionals. We were trained to treat skin disorders and to improve the appearance of the

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skin, but we need to recognize that most of us are at a loss as to how to explain our work to a lay audience in everyday language. The popularization of scientific knowledge is best left to qualified specialists whom we must convince that our interests are those that best serve society.

Naturally, when a dermatologist who possesses some journalistic skill joins forces with a journalist who possesses

some medical knowledge, the results tend to be excellent. Both deserve our support, and should be encouraged to work together.

Conflict of interests

I declare no conflicts of interest.