The Worst Things You Can Say to a Patient

By Physicians Practice Staff
"...'You're too old to be coming with your mother.' Unless you are certain he is there with his mother and not his (significantly older) wife."
James Legan, MD, a Great Falls, Mont.-based internist

"I think it has more to do with nonverbal communication rather than actually what is said. And that would be to appear indifferent, distracted and not listen when spending time with your patient."
Mark Birmingham, MD, a Boulder, Colo.-based podiatric foot surgeon

"...'Because of your age' Talk about burning some immediate bridges in terms of bedside manner."
Elizabeth Seymour, MD, a Denton, Texas-based family medicine physician

"I think the worst thing to say to a patient, is something to the extent of 'I can no longer take care of you or you need to find another provider to address your medical concerns'.

We as providers question why they came to see us in the first place, and [need to] realize that many are medically untreated mental health cases!"
Deborah Winiger, MD, a Vernon Hills, Ill.-based family medicine physician

"A patient told me the worst thing you can say as a doctor is, 'Umm...I don't know.'

It doesn't provide a lot of confidence"
Stephen H. Hanson, PA-C, a Bakersfield, Calif.-based plastic and reconstructive surgery physician assistant

"The worst thing that you can say to a patient is to disparage their belief systems or not be supportive of health practices that are benign or harmless. Personal beliefs are strong. I work with a very diverse community and [can] see how important faith and beliefs are to patient's wellbeing, even though I disagree with them and know that the science doesn't support the belief."
Jeffrey Blank, MD, a Crystal Lake, Ill.-based podiatric foot surgeon

"Over the years I've had difficult times discussing everything from cancer to billing. It's hard to tell someone that their pathology results came back bad. I recently did a bunion surgery on a healthy younger woman. At the same time, I excised a tiny dark dot at the end of the incision and sent it for biopsy. When it came back melanoma, I amputated her big toe a month after the initial surgery. Although the surgical oncologist and medical oncologist agreed, it was really difficult to tell her that I needed to amputate."
"You need to stop smoking"
"You need to lose weight"
"You need to eat healthier"
"You need to exercise more"

"Thanks for helping us lower future social security and Medicare obligations. You keep doing what you’re doing and you’ll die sooner rather than later, so thanks for that."

"Don’t get mad at me. I wasn’t the one who put the (food, cigarette) in your mouth."
"On a more serious tone, I would recommend always starting with 'people' and then move to 'task.' Be warm friendly, take a little time for small talk and then move to discuss why they are seeing you. It’s not that hard to do, but [this] does take some effort. Sometimes it’s not what we say but how we send messages.
Leann DiDomenico, a Plymouth, Mass.-based administrative director

"Oh, I remember you."