

Throughout most of modern medical history, doctors were authoritarian. They gave orders to their patients and their patients diligently followed these orders. There is a growing movement in health care that is changing this model of health care to a more cooperative model where the patient plays a larger role in the decision making process.

The reason for this change is partly due to the rising cost of health care and shrinking health insurance benefits. Patients are less likely to just accept a doctor's order to undergo expensive procedures when they are having to shoulder the cost.

The second major reason for this change is due to the internet. Patients now have access to information that they didn't have before. It allows them to research their options. As more and more patients visit their doctors armed with greater knowledge, doctors are forced to include the patients in the decision making process. Unfortunately, while the internet makes a lot of medical information available to the general public, most people don't have the knowledge background to adequately understand and interpret much of the information.

A recent study illustrated this problem. The study assessed the level of knowledge that patients had of eight specific conditions and their treatments. The knowledge was assessed after these individuals had discussed the management and treatment options with their doctors. The treatments and associated conditions were medications for high cholesterol, high blood pressure and depression; screening tests for cancer; surgery for low back pain; and knee/hip replacement surgery.

The study revealed that even after discussing these conditions/treatments with their doctors, patients still did not have enough information to make informed decisions about their care. For back surgery, patients did not know what the odds were that they would be better, worse or no different after surgery.

The burden of solving this problem lies on the shoulders of the doctors who treat these patients. The word 'doctor' originally comes from a word that means 'teacher'. We doctors, need to do a much better job of being teachers in order to help our patients make truly informed decisions.