

Communication in Medicine

Part I: Communication as a Process and its Critical Issues

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"The only big problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place".

George Bernard Shaw, Wrighter and Playwrighter

"Communication must be useful for the recipients and not for those who promote it",

Sergio Mattarella, President of Italian Republic

Summary

Communication is an integrating part of our life and influences continuously the relationship with ourselves and the others. It is a process that, based on defined elements, provides the transmission of information and news. Communication in Medicine or in Medical topics transmission is particularly important and delicate matter that needs attention and clear, ethical and responsible management. We divided the paper in three parts: Communication as a process and its critical issues, Medical communication and the relationship with the patient and Psychological aspects of the doctor-patient relationship. In this first part we report some historical news, the mechanisms of communication and some critical issues especially regarding the incorrect way of information transmission and some aspects and modalities of its (voluntary/involuntary) manipulation.

Echoes from the past

It is not possible not to communicate. This is one of the five axioms of communication [1] that brings us back to the birth of the universe when we can imagine communication was born, derived from the Latin as coming into contact, first among things, then, with the passing of millennia and centuries, among plants and animals, that is among all living beings. Man communicates with the outside through the senses which are the tools through which the human body perceives information from the surrounding world. Even the inner world receives information which, through the influence of the brain, neuro-hormonal, psycho-behavioral systems, intestinal microbiota, etc., are processed to give, in a few words, answers to the two great human objectives that are survival and reproduction. With the arrival of man on earth, communication has become a necessity, that is, the need to transmit information to others, contemporaries or posterity. From the rock inscriptions we began to understand how our primitive ancestors represented and told the daily life and how they lived, hunted, prayed, etc., how they came into contact with the disease (invisible enemy sent by supernatural forces coming from the sky or from the

gods as divine punishment) and how the Medicine, born to heal or at least alleviate the suffering of the disease with prayers, rites and magical potions, took shape and developed [2]. Human life stretches from the past, through the present and to future along the temporal flow of change and development; hence, improvement and worsening represent evolutive and involutive paths, respectively, both expressions of change. The need that man himself has to communicate and transmit information to other men probably starts from here, with the graffiti of the caves and later with the graphic representations.

Subsequently, the writing came up and the graphic communication of signs and the vocal one becomes written communication and with writing the first documentation of communication is born, which is realized as an objective instrument of materialization of ideas and of thought, becoming a means of information [1]. From the ancient clay tablets on which the first Sumerian cuneiform script appears, we read that Enmerkar, after having repeatedly sent a vocal message through his emissary to the Lord of Aratta and having always received an unwelcome response, thinking that the king did not understand.... *then the Lord of Uruk took a clod of clay and wrote words on it as on a table. Never a word had been written on clay. But now, since the God of Sun had so inspired him, so it happened. And Enmerkar wrote the table [3].*

The subsequent history acquires more and more documentation concerning uses, customs, politics and events of peoples such as Sumerians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians and gradually many others, and which has enriched our knowledge. On the clay tablets of the library of Ashurbanipal we find the first texts, referring to the Sumerians, of Medicine, diagnosis, therapy, pharmacology, hygiene, surgery, the first code (of Ur Nammu) on medical responsibility (a thousand years before the Code of Hammurabi, Babylonian) and the first logo of the two snakes coiled around a stick (symbol of regeneration of the Sumerian god Enki) which later became the symbol of doctors (the Caduceus) [4,5].

And again, information on Assyrian, Akkadian, Babylonian and Egyptian Medicine (extensive written documentation on the papyri of Kahun, Ebers, Edwin Smith, Hearst, Chester, Berlin and London) [6-8]. In the votive chapel of Imhotep in the temple of Hatshepsut in Deir el Bahari, the oldest health documentation is engraved on a column (around 1500 BC). *Andromachos, Macedonian, suffering man comes to the good god Amenhotep; he was sick and the good god healed him the same day...*

Organized health records appear around the 5th century BC. with the clay tablets of the temple of Epidaurus, the first form of hospital, on which the names of the sick, his city of origin, the illness of each sick person, the treatments received and the healings obtained were written [9]. The Corpus Hippocraticum [10,11] represents the largest collection of medical texts which, overcoming many of the concepts of antiquity, lays the foundations for modern Medicine, including the relationship with patients and the transmission of information with an educational content.

In Rome, in the period of the extension of its domains beyond the Alps and the Mediterranean Sea the first written newsletters of current affairs aimed at informing the receptors of the time in a direct and immediate form, with a real journalistic connotation, even if rudimentary; the subrostrans (those who provided information and indiscretions near the Forum) had the task of the daily publication of the Acta [12].

The transmission of information, which for centuries has taken place and handed down verbally and by means of handwritten texts, undergoes a first revolution with the invention of printing by Gutenberg, made official with the publication of the Bible between 1448 and 1454; however, there is a print trace from discoveries referring to many centuries before in Egypt and later in China [13,14].

Towards the end of the 15th century the *canard* appeared in France, as printed sheets consisting of 8 to 10 pages with numerous illustrations, accompanying pleasant and curious information, while around 1500 the first sheets, **Venetian notices**, 4 - 8 side manuscripts appeared weekly and sold at the price of 2 *soldi* (a Venetian *gaxeta*) with commercial, financial and political news, which was followed in 1563 by the first publication with the name of **Gazeta** (derived from *gaxeta*), copies of which were also distributed in maritime provinces

of the *Serenissima* [15]. With the definition of newspaper or gazette, a large production of printed news sheets appeared in the following years in Italy and also in Europe. **The Aviso Relation order Zeitung** is the first weekly printed newspaper published in Augsburg, Germany in 1609, while the first printed newspaper, the **Leipziger Zeitung**, was born in Leipzig in 1660. In England the first publication appeared on March 11, 1702, **The Daily Courant**, the first English daily newspaper by Samuel Buckley, the first editor who also published the first issue of **The Spectator** on March 1st, 1711.

In the following centuries, written communication spread and evolved simultaneously with the development and introduction of new means of communication: telegraph, telephone, radio, television and finally social media. Today communication is everywhere as in the past, with the difference that compared to this it is materialized so much to influences significantly our life.

Communication as a process

Communication (from the Latin cum = with, and munire = to bind, build, and communico = to share, to get in touch, to involve) means the process and modalities of transmission of information from one individual to another (or from one place to another), through the exchange of a message elaborated according to the rules of a specific common code [16]. From the general etymological perspective, which precisely defines communication as an “*act of communicating, transmitting to others*” [17], some specific perspectives arise, among which those of psychology are of particular impact, both theoretical and practical. Just think of the complex articulation of the communicative act in terms of structure and functions, verbal and non-verbal [18] of society and the mass, of behavioristic/psychosocial/psychoanalytic/systemic approach [19]. Just think also, from the perspective of human psychology, of the following precise definition: “*Humans communicate to relate and exchange ideas, knowledge, feelings, experiences and for many other interpersonal and social purposes*” [20].

Watzlawick defines human communication as an interactive exchange between two or more participants, endowed with mutual intentionality and a certain level of awareness, able to share a certain meaning on the basis of symbolic and conventional systems whose signification and signaling is referred to the reference culture [1]. The process is based on five main characteristics that distinguish the different modes of interaction, outlined and defined axioms of communication, namely, communication between two or more people, as verbal or non-verbal or behavior that always expresses a message, a) communication cannot fail to occur, b) it occurs through the content and method of transmission of the message, c) according to a timed sequence of stimulus-response exchanges, d) through verbal (speech) or non-verbal channels (deeds, attitudes, voice tone, facial expression, etc.), e) through a symmetrical (between equal or minimal differences) or complementary (asymmetrical, with accentuation of the differences) interaction between two people [1].

The communicative process, according to the Shannon-Weaver model [21], is based on the following fundamental elements:

1. Sender, source of the message
2. Receiver, recipient of the message
3. Message, content of what is sent or transmitted
4. Code, mode (language) in which the message is sent
5. Channel, means by which the message is sent
6. Context, place, time and circumstances in which the message is sent
7. Filter, all the factors that disturb or facilitate the sending of the message and its reception.

Filters represent important elements in the communication process for their ability to favor, influence, alter or disturb communication; among these there are physical elements (noises, silence, buzzing, low voice, etc.), psychological (emotionality, anxiety, nervousness, prejudices, expectations, lack of empathy, etc.), others (such as games, interests, motivations, etc).

Information (from the Latin to give shape to the mind, to an idea) is the set of interrelated data, with which an idea (or a fact) takes shape and is communicated [16]. In the communication process, especially verbal or written, the information represents the content of the communication itself, which is given value and which transmits knowledge and, therefore, potentially useful for the user.

Information becomes news when it refers to a fact or event that is made known or the report of a fact that is brought to the attention through a journalistic connotation and through the most varied means of communication. The definition of news is subjective and depends on factors that individually or combined together attribute value to the news itself [22].

The news is a dynamic element based on research, in-depth analysis and disclosure which gives complete and truthful information in its positive and correct meaning; however, personal reconstructions, sometimes misleading, deceptive, disorienting, sometimes presented unconsciously but often intentionally are frequently evident: orienting the recipient through disinformation is not a rare condition.

In the 1st century AD, Marcus Fabius Quintilianus [23] defines the ingredients (the good rules) of planning (Quis = Who, Quid = What, Quando = When, Ubi = Where, Cur = Why, Quomodo = in which way, that is the Subject, the Formal Cause, the Temporal Cause, the Material Cause, the Final Cause and the Modal Cause), a methodology of communication in the art of oratory and educational training.

In order to ensure that the news was given in a complete way to guarantee the correct communication, in the 18th century in England, the 5 W rule was introduced (Who, What, Where, When, Why); only later did Rudyard Kipling introduce the sixth letter H for How = In which way, to complete what Quintilianus had written previously.

The communication process, the presentation and transmission of an information/news, the problem-based approach of any process in any context of realization or change of something have a common or very similar way of proceeding, within a scheme that foresees the relationship between the various elements, sometimes evident, often to be searched and identified. Respecting this way of proceeding is the basis of understanding events and achieving objectives [24].

The theme of the communication process (moreover strongly “approved”) cannot ignore the particular attention to the implications in terms of sociology and politics of mass communication, for which effects and situational context are of particular importance as underlined by the famous Lasswell model [25]: “*Who says what, to whom, in what channel, with what effect*”. In its essential pragmatism, focused precisely on the “macro” dimension, this paradigm allows us to highlight how important the effect is (both on the many receivers, the so-called “population”, and on the few senders, in turn influenced from feedback, real or presumed) in addition to analyzing the sender, the message, the receiver and the channel. Therefore, we have the strong emphasis of the communicative effects (E). The delicacy of all this in terms of “social and medical policies” is therefore well understood.

Likewise, expanding Lasswell’s discourse, the delicacy of the historical-social and political-cultural aspects is clearly highlighted: variables that can be “crazy” and that converge in the situational context (SC) (in the epistemological field this is equivalent to the Popperian theme of situational logic). What happens then, in such a turmoil, of the desirable effective sanitary/healthy discourse? All said above leads even, in the exasperated dilation of “all connected/disconnected”, to having to expand and rewrite the formula in this way: 5W + H + E + SC, with the addition of effects and context. Furthermore, the famous “Why”, precisely because it is easily molded (and manipulated) by human interpretations, should always be carefully evaluated: on the one hand as objective and on the other as subjective, without forgetting the concept of “intention” (in turn conscious/explicit or unconscious/ implicit), the communicative intention of both those who launch (or would like to launch) the message and those who receive (or would like to receive) the message.

Some critical issues in communication

The 5W + H rule, subsequently with the addition of E + SC, has always represented the guide for writing an article, but also for transferring information, so that the information itself and the news contained therein were presented in a clear and complete way, and easily understood by anyone who read them. In modern times it is applied not only to journalism but also to other sectors: political, economic and social. However, for some years now, it seems to be regularly disregarded especially in the journalistic field where it is increasingly difficult to read an article and understand what happened, the linear reference of the facts is often disordered and mixed with comments and opinions of the writer who confuse the reader.

It also often happens in communication in general, social media, talk shows and even in conferences of any kind. Correct communication is a way of expressing reality and explaining it, not creating it or inserting facts into our reality and making them adapt to our vision of it. The manipulative and insincere nature of the transmission of news is spreading more and more; in fact, in recent times, the word “sincerity” has been worn down by the excessive use that has been made of it so that it has become a hypocritical slogan connected in a far from clear way with the idea that there can really be a correct vision of things, that is, one’s own [24].

With the spread of sophisticated means of communication today, the manipulation of information and news transmitted is becoming an increasingly evident reality, often with different levels of risk and danger. The manipulation of communication and distortion of reality is an ancient phenomenon which, however, in the modern era has become more widespread in ever more numerous facts of everyday life. Watzlawick said that the most dangerous illusion is that there is only one reality; in fact, there are many versions of reality (the true truth and the truth that appears, as it is found in common language), all deriving from communication and from what it is capable of creating and not from objective and unchangeable truths [26]. The dissemination of information and news should be based, instead of on manipulation, on the respect of the 5W + H rule. It seems, however, in our opinion that the manipulative nature of the communication that occurs in certain circumstances is not so much related to the correct transmission of truthful information as to the effect (E) that one wants to induce in the receiver (reader/listener). “*The promises, the great promises, are the soul of advertising*” said Samuel Johnson [27]; it could be considered one of the many ways used by politicians or advertisers.

This way of reporting news or transmitting information does not give all that is necessary to those who receive it in order to really know the facts and be able to express their opinion and contributes, in our opinion, to create a false reality, precisely because the perception of the message sent can be influenced by many factors depending on which it can determine different reactions in the recipient.

Oriana Fallaci said that the public figure, due to the fact that he is known, before speaking must carefully evaluate what he says precisely because of the effects that his message can cause as a public figure (personal communication); every stimulus or message sent, influenced or not by reinforcing elements, provokes a response or reaction that influences the behavior [26]. The communication of the news in a clear and correct way, presumes that those who report it adhere in an aseptic manner to the facts as they have observed them or have been reported to them, separating them from personal comments that often alter the objectivity of the news itself to seem like an opinion. more than a fact. Whoever listens to the news without comment alone is able to evaluate it according to its parameters. This way of reporting news and transferring information does not detract from the need to report opinions, hypotheses, comments, doubts and anything else that is not the news but simply something subjective and personal whose content can be freely evaluated by the listener/reader as such and not as news. Today, reading the newspapers or watching television debates, there is clear evidence of a strong hypocrisy that transpires from those who say they are impartial and objective, but in fact take the side of their favorites trying to induce those who read or listen to share their opinions and to believe that their ideas are the right ones: what about the news? That doesn’t matter, it passes in second order or is sometimes taken up to justify one’s reasoning. If you have the patience to watch some interviews with ordinary people, you realize that these are repeating more and more often what the newspapers published days before or some so-called commentators said on TV.

It is not uncommon to note that such behavior leads to misinformation and, therefore, disorientation. An example of this happened frequently during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic with talk shows set on show chatter, discordant voices from commentators, a succession of conflicting recommendations and indications disseminated by public institutions, incessant flow of messages on social networks, denialism recovered from the past and always present in the history of man, which have created disorientation among people, the one that denies reality and pushes us to underestimate the problem; oriented more towards making an audience, controversy and showing off than the transmission of the substance of information and the transfer of useful information for people's behavior in a delicate moment such as that of the pandemic, a problem of public health. A continuous bombardment was added to this by newspapers with the spread of disturbing news often sensationalist that painted an unreal world in the incredulous eyes of the people. No concern or attention for the effects that confused and contradictory statements made by the so-called experts were causing in the listeners. The final result was a certain disorientation of the people and unleashing of the fans of the web with a great distortion of reality and an increased diffusion of fake news [28]. The univocal and correct communication, fundamental and indispensable tool both in daily life but even more in emergency situations, has jumped creating confusion and at the same time fear, worry, insecurity, intolerance, exasperation, anger, but also disbelief.

It seemed to relive what Alessandro Manzoni described in the XXXI chapter of the "Promessi Sposi" regarding the plague of Milan in 1630, when doctors, even famous doctors, people, politicians, magistrates and authorities all denied the plague, who for preconceived opinion who out of interest such as "*whoever threw a word of danger there, whoever motivated the plague, was greeted with incredulous mockery and angry contempt*". The disbelief and denial of reality "against reason and evidence" was manifested by the contradictory explanations and in contrast with the real data, by the "imperfection of the edicts", by the "neglect of carrying them out", by the "dexterity in circumvent them", from the delay with which these were written and published. This type of communication favored the spread of the plague.

A professional in contact with the public, in order to be credible, serious and correct, should express his own opinions and his own opinion on the basis of his own advice and supported by real data, read objectively and not interpreted according to his own personal interest (supporter action). Correct communication must not lead to confusion and disorientation in the listener/reader, especially when the information concerns topics relating to people's health and Medicine, otherwise the ensuing result is disinformation, which in any case costs the community; it should not even aim to sacrifice the truthfulness and evaluation of the effects on the receiver in favor of increasing the audience. It is our belief that opinions must be supported by facts but clearly distinguished from them (facts cannot be confused with opinions).

Attending television broadcasts or reading the articles of the vast majority of newspapers, today we notice that communication is frequently and continuously manipulated to such an extent that one has the impression of living in a virtual reality (imaginary, sometimes even imagined in an implicit-unconscious way). unconscious, and therefore particularly subtle because the same "issuer" is prey to it): a form of Truman show, built on purpose where the true truth (rarely cited) and the other "truths" (pseudo-truths continuously represented) coexist, those told, the manipulated ones, the intoxicated ones, but, since they affect people's needs and feelings, they are the most accepted ones. The real truth, the authentic one, on the other hand, is transformed into an idea, a fantasy, or an unreal thing, such as it is difficult to report it and make it accepted. There is the impression that communication is largely used as a mean to manipulate and orient the minds of persons and people.

A manipulative form of communication is that of gaslighting [29]. The term is taken from a play by the English playwright Patrick Hamilton, published in 1935 under the name of **Gaslight** [30], later known in the USA as *Angel Street* and adapted in various film productions. The plot is about a husband who tries to persuade his wife to a different reality by moving and hiding objects in the house and insisting that she is wrong or remembers badly when he notices these changes; on the verge of madness, the only thing she has, to cling to reality, is the gas lights, which her husband uses to look for the jewels of a woman he killed in the upstairs apartment. The content of the work gave rise to the word **gaslighting** which is used in Psychology to define a form of violence and psychological manipulation in which false

information (the cognitive part) is presented to the victim as real. The final purpose is to make her doubt her memories and judgments and her own perception of reality and thus force her to feel wrong and to gradually lose her critical sense (emotional and relational part); to present a reality different from the real one, perhaps also using the subliminal method (to reinforce the attention, very rapid messages or frames of tragic and dramatic events are inserted) to make those who receive it lose their critical sense and therefore orient them towards a different reality, that is to manipulate the subject.

A form of gaslighting is also the one that is recorded today as a result of the constant narration that is fed to us by TV, newspapers and social media, which wears out and corrodes the conscience of many who, in the end, decide to give up and stop believing in real reality, submitting them to fictitious reality. Driven by the anesthetic to make revolutions and subsequently to be kind to themselves (to justify themselves) and ready to change orientation when the failure to fulfill “dreams” is mixed with a new wave of needs to be satisfied. A Russian general used to say that wars today are no longer won with arms but those who have the greatest ability to manipulate the minds of the peoples win them; we could also say that, for example, in politics the winner is the one who makes the most promises and has the greater capabilities to influence others. Once notoriety was synonymous of credibility; today more often those who promise the impossible and shoot the biggest ones become more credible in the eyes of people. Also in the medical field, the communication presents important critical issues as we will see in the following parts.

Final Remarks

Paraphrasing Watzlawick we can say that as change pervades our life and greatly influences the relationship with ourselves and others [24], communication is also a “sine qua non” of our life and social order [1]. From the beginning of our existence each of us is involved in a complex and dynamic process of learning the rules of communication, their acquisition and their voluntary or involuntary application in our daily life, but of these rules, which are respected when communication it is effective and violated when this is disturbed, each of us is only minimally aware [1]. Human communication, as a complex process of transmitting information and emotions, aims to observe, analyze and understand the behavior of people and the reactions that the reception of the information provokes, through the study of the observable manifestations in the relationship among individuals, therein including the characteristics of the different components. Among the various components that we believe must be present to demonstrate correct and effective communication are the field of observation, the general context, the means and methods of transmission, the objectives and effects that communication determines. But at the basis of everything, in our opinion, there must be some fundamental principles such as ethical principles and respect for others. A wide field of observation and an evaluation of the context, adequate means and methods of transmission, a definition of objectives facilitate the possibility of understanding the messages and reactions. However, when the fundamental principles of ethics and respect are lacking, the correctness of communication is lacking and its manipulation is evident. Taking the communicating behaviors back within respect for others and ethical principles seems an impossible operation; but if all of us start from childhood and adolescence, with school and family, and then with training and work practice, it will still be an arduous and long but not impossible job. A good training will not completely solve the problem or eliminate the manipulation of communication but it will certainly lead to a better and correct use of the same.

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