P.293 - Smiling Doctor, Happy Patient: The Role of Facial Expressions in Patient-Doctor Communication

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Poster Session 1

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Effective communication between doctors and patients is essential for ensuring positive healthcare outcomes. However, the role of non-verbal communication, especially facial expression and its impact on patient satisfaction and conversation quality has been largely unexplored. To address this gap, we conducted a study to investigate how facial expressions of medical students during simulated doctor appointments with standardized patients influenced the quality of the conversation and patient satisfaction.A total of 52 medical students (40 females, mean age = 21.96 years) from the third semester of the medical faculty at the University of Augsburg participated in the study. Medical students engaged in a conversation (about 7 minutes) with a standardized patient playing the role of a parent seeking advice on vaccinating their 3-month-old child. The interaction was recorded on video and facial expressions were analyzed offline using the Facial Action Coding System. Conversation quality was assessed via standardized questionnaires (e.g., Berlin Global Rating) being filled out by medical students, by standardized patients, and by communication experts.Our findings revealed significant associations between the degree of smiling of the medical student and conversation quality. Medical students who displayed genuine smiles, with contractions of the orbicularis oculi and zygomaticus muscles, were rated more positively by the standardized patients as well as by the communication experts.Our study highlights the importance of facial expressions in doctor-patient interactions. The facial display of positive affect leads to more patient satisfaction and a better conversation quality.