The 10-fold Return on Mastering Webside Manners

By Christian Milaster
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At the beginning of the Covid-19 health crisis many clinicians (physician and advanced practice providers) were unceremoniously thrown into the world of telehealth. With a highly-infectious deadly virus rampaging through our community, the question was not about whether telehealth was good or not. It was about getting care to patients and keeping healthcare staff safe, especially during times of personal-protective equipment shortages.

All providers stepped up to the challenge, though some were more enthusiastic about using telehealth than others.

What most were lacking though, was a quite simple, but very important orientation on the "webside manners" of telehealth. Most were given a webcam, a Zoom, Facetime or Doxy.me account and told: Go! Do Telehealth!

While doing telehealth well is quite easy, many of the subtle aspects of "delivering care at a distance" at the same level of quality as an in-person visit are not that obvious. Which is where training on some basic "webside manners" can help tremendously on many levels – and provide a 10-fold Return or better on the investment to help clinicians to master their webside manners.

Webside Manners, defined

Obviously the term "webside" manners is a play on words of the commonly known "bedside manners" that, as we have learned over the past decades, have an important effect not only on patient satisfaction or (averted) malpractice suits but also on patient engagement and outcomes.

While every clinician should be well-versed in proper "bedside" manners (even in the outpatient, ambulatory world) extending the proper tone and communication to the "virtual" world can be non-intuitive.

Here's a list of the 12 aspects of optimal communication, that we have helped clinicians to master to maximize their "performance" in the telehealth world:

1. Eye Contact for the first 30 seconds

To look directly into the lens of your webcam at the beginning of a visit is absolutely crucial and may be the most disorienting, uncomfortable new habit to adopt to. By looking into the lens, the patient on the other end will feel as if you are looking right at them. If you are looking down at their face on your screen, you appear not to be looking at them. As the saying goes "you only have one chance to make a first impression" and by opening up the visit with your introductory words while looking directly into the lens you will set the tone for the visit.

2. Acknowledge the Background

Interacting via video is new to many of us, especially for something as intimate as talking about our health. To build rapport and to get over the awkwardness of this new experience, it is important not to gloss over the aspects that are so different from when patients come into a clinic. In a clinic environment, we are meeting either in sterile, spartan exam rooms or in lavishly decorated (mostly diplomas) physicians' offices.

Now, for a telehealth visit, the background, what's behind the patient and what's behind the clinician, suddenly warrants noticing. As a clinician you may comment on your view behind you, but even more so, you want to acknowledge the patient's location — and also, as appropriate, thank them for "inviting you into their personal space".

Since house visits are no longer the norm, it is quite unusual for a patient to allow a clinician into their home. To set the appropriate boundaries and trust, it is thus important that clinicians acknowledge the situation by commenting on the patient's background, where applicable.

3. Acknowledge Noise

Not only is acknowledging the visual background important, but it is also important to notice and acknowledge any background noise – on either end. A noise at the patient end may be an indication that the patient is not alone and that the privacy of the visit is in jeopardy. Background noise may also distract the patient or the clinician.

We often suggest that the nurse setting up the visit advise the patient to use a headset or headphones to at least ensure the confidentiality of the physician's comments; but oftentimes, especially in behavioral health, it is also important that the patient's words can stay private.

For noise in the background coming from the clinician's end, since the patient cannot see what is going on or who else may be in the room (which should not be the case), it is important for the clinician to note any voices coming through the door or other sounds that may distract the patient from listening to the clinician.

4. Acknowledge Novelty

While by now many patients (and clinicians) may have had a telehealth visit, it is still a good practice to acknowledge the novelty of telehealth and how this is "out of the ordinary". With the physician self-disclosing that they themselves experience telehealth differently, they allow patients to admit and disclose the same, thereby strengthening the trust.

5. Acknowledge Benefits

Finally it is a great practice to also acknowledge how great to have telehealth as a tool available to continue to care for patients, especially those for whom it would have been difficult to get to a telehealth appointment.

When you compare access to care via telehealth to no access to care, telehealth beats no care every time.

6. Periodic Direct Eye Contact

Just like in the first recommendation, reminding oneself to look straight into the camera lens is an excellent way to build great rapport with the patient since it feels to them like you are looking straight at them. As mentioned, it can be very awkward to look straight into the camera, rather than our natural inclination to focus on the patient's face on the screen. But even the slight look down takes away from the power of creating a human connection.

Obviously, looking right into the camera lens is what reporters, news anchors and actors do all the time. Although they have it a little easier in that they don't have a picture of their audience right below the camera.

The goal is not to look into the camera all of the time. I recommend to use it when you are about to make an important point, for additional emphasis.

7. Ensure Patient Comfort

Similar to acknowledging the newness, noises, or the background, it is even more important in this new mode of "delivering care at a distance" to check in with the patient to ensure they are comfortable. This can be related to privacy (see the next point) or simply with how they have positioned themselves and their device – whether that's a smartphone or a tablet.

You want to make sure that they are not distracted and don't have anything else on their mind.

When patients come into a clinic setting, there is a whole routine that often takes an hour to precedes a visit: the patient has to drive to the clinic, find parking, check in and wait in the waiting room before being taken to the office of the exam room. All of this is part of the "experience" of "going to the doctor".

With telehealth, the patient could just be done a few minutes ago sending the kids off to school or putting a baby to bed or putting the groceries away, etc. It's thus important to spend a little bit more time in the beginning to "start the visit", to invite the patient to become fully present.

8. Ensure Patient Privacy

One key aspect of comfort is privacy. Healthcare issues are often very personal and many don't want

their kids, spouses, or roommates to know about their health issues. There are three aspects of privacy to consider, and each has different solutions.

The first aspect is to verbally or visually assure the patient that the clinician is in a private location ("in my office"). It goes without saying that any doors should be closed and that a telehealth visit should not be conducted from a cubicle office with neighbors.

The second aspect, which is easy to address, is to ensure that the clinician's voice cannot be overheard by others that are near the patient. A foolproof way to accomplish this is for the patient to use headphones or a headset. This could also be addressed during the "pre-visit" check in by the nurse or by an automated script or prompts.

The third aspect is to ensure that the patient cannot be overheard. If the patient is not in a location where he or she can freely talk, suggesting to the patient to move or to reschedule the appointment may be the only way to ensure their privacy.

9. Body Language – Leaning Back and Leaning In

Similar to the tip about making periodic eye contact, it is important to also consciously use body language as a tool. Leaning back can indicate giving the patient space to share. Leaning in and getting closer to the camera, can also put more emphasis on a very important point.

10. Your Setup: Background

While it is important to acknowledge what is going on in the patient's background (tip #2), it is equally important to ensure that the clinician's background is free from distractions as well. A nicely decorated wall or shelf provides a good professional background.

For many years I have used a room divider screen to eliminate any distractions from my background. It's quite affordable, looks professional and, with my camera slightly zoomed in, allows me to frame my picture neatly. Attention should also be paid to what the background behind you looks like.

In other situations, we positioned physicians in front of a bookcase or their "diploma wall" which can also look very professional.

Two more thoughts: by now probably everyone knows that you should not have a window or bright light source behind you, as that will make your face look really dark. And I strongly advise against virtual backgrounds unless you (a) have a green screen behind you and (b) have picked a very professional, non-distracting background that is unique to you.

11. Your Setup: Positioning the Camera

I'm assuming that most clinicians are set up with 2 monitors and, ideally, a separate, movable USB-connected camera. That setup allows for the highest level of productivity and the best flexibility.

Even though over time you may train yourself to look directly into the camera lens more often, one little trick is to position the window with the patient view as close as possible underneath the camera as possible. That way when you are looking at the patient, you are looking more closely into the camera.

12. Your Setup: Looking Somewhere Else

When you are set up with two monitors, it is important to mention to the patient that when you are looking "away" from them, what you are doing is looking at the second monitor, e.g., your electronic medical record or other software you may use during your visit with the patient.

This can be established at the beginning of the visit ("I may occasionally look over here so I can look up your information on our medical record system") and repeated again later.

Some people are also taking written notes and here again, simply acknowledging that "Let me take some notes" is very helpful, since patients have a very limited point of view and can't see what else is going on – unlike in an in-person visit environment.

The Benefits of Excellent Webside Manners

One of the biggest returns of investment I have seen when investing in enabling clinicians to master webside manners is in the clinicians confidence to operate on top of their skillset, even though the environment is very different from what they were used to for 10, 15, or 25 years.

Physicians go through a rigorous, regimented training that most of the time has them learn from and under the supervision of the previous generation. From my user experience design perspective, it is important for the well-being of the patient that the physician exude a high degree of confidence. Having an ailment, receiving a diagnosis or receiving care can be a very scary experience and knowing that one is "in good hands" by a doctor that is confident in their abilities, confident in their assessment is reassuring and a critical component of care and healing.

Thus when clinicians cannot be completely confident because they are outside of their comfort zone there are numerous ramifications. I have seen it over and over again that when clinicians are not comfortable "in front of the camera" the patient satisfaction scores are typically very low (as are of course the clinician satisfaction scores).

Conversely, after we worked with clinicians on a basic webside-manner orientation, their level of confidence increased dramatically and so did the patient satisfaction scores. Increasing proficiency through webside-manner training is therefore the linchpin to telehealth success and all of its other benefits.

Once clinicians are trained in and have mastered the webside manners, clinical practices can expect to see most if not all of these benefits in return:

1. Increased Clinician Comfort & Confidence

The increase in the confidence of clinicians that have been properly trained in webside manners is by far the greatest benefit that I have seen. By showing clinicians how to master the technical side and make sure they are "looking good", the training puts the clinician back in control of the interaction with the patient.

A high degree of comfort and confidence is also the basis for at least half of the other benefits on this list.

2. Improved Clinician Regard of Telehealth

With an increased confidence of using telehealth comes a much more positive regard of telehealth and with that a higher likelihood of integrating this care delivery modality into the clinicians' daily practice.

As I've written about a number of times, Telehealth is a clinical tool that should be wielded at the discretion of clinicians, who can only do so if they feel comfortable using it.

3. Higher Clinician Satisfaction with their job

The first correlation of a higher job satisfaction obviously stems from the first benefit, the increased level of confidence. Since telehealth can make up between 20-50% of a clinician's practice, feeling confident about using telehealth is a key contributor to the satisfaction.

Before Covid-19 — before everyone had "embraced" telehealth — the smart, future-oriented clinicians looking for new jobs were explicitly seeking out opportunities that involved practicing telehealth or getting exposure to other digital health tools. Therefore, working at an organization that provides adequate support (such as the training in webside manners) contributes to a higher level of job satisfaction.

4. Patient Privacy Better Maintained

With the training of clinicians on the appropriate things to ask and look out for comes an increased protection of the patient's privacy. Clinicians can take a number of steps to ensure the patient's privacy and to be on the lookout for when patient privacy is at risk.

5. Patients More At Ease

A more confident clinician who also has a number of suggestions on how to make the patient more comfortable will definitely put the patient more at ease, which paves the way for the next set of benefits of well-trained webside manners.

6. Higher Patient Satisfaction

When clinicians feel more comfortable in this "new environment" they can more effortlessly address the patients concerns or focus on the patient's body language to notice important clues. Clinicians that are confident with the technology can also yield the various tools (screen sharing, white boards, sending files, sharing text) much more effortlessly making it a great experience for patients.

And when patients feel they're understood and acknowledged, their level of satisfaction will increase.

7. Higher Patient Engagement

And with higher patient satisfaction comes a higher level of patient engagement. When clinicians are confident, then patients are more likely to trust the clinician and are also more likely to retain what clinicians suggested they do.

8. Increased Follow-Up Visits

While telehealth — due to its convenience and the elimination of travel — in itself contributes greatly to the increase in follow-up visits, when a clinician is confident, friendly and ensures a great experience for the patient, the likelihood of the patient scheduling a follow-up visit increases sharply.

9. Lower No-Show Rates

In some areas, traditional now show rates can be as high as in the low 20s (22%, 23%) and telehealth has repeatedly shown that, again largely due to the convenience of telehealth, it can help to lower no-show rates into the single digit realm (4%, 5%).

This, however, is also a function of the engagement of the clinician with the patient which is in turn proportional to the clinician's camera presence.

10. Improved Health Outcomes

In the end, all of the preceding benefits of properly trained webside manners can lead to improved outcomes, especially when patient engagement increases and no show rates decrease.

And ultimately isn't this what healthcare is all about?

On the Importance of Investing in Webside Manner Training

Investing into webside manner training is neither hard or rocket science, nor does it require a lot of time investment. All it takes is a simple 20-minute session to train clinicians on the 12 webside manners and pave the way to reaping the 10 benefits.

What webside manners do you think are most important? What other benefits have you seen as a result of well-trained clinicians?
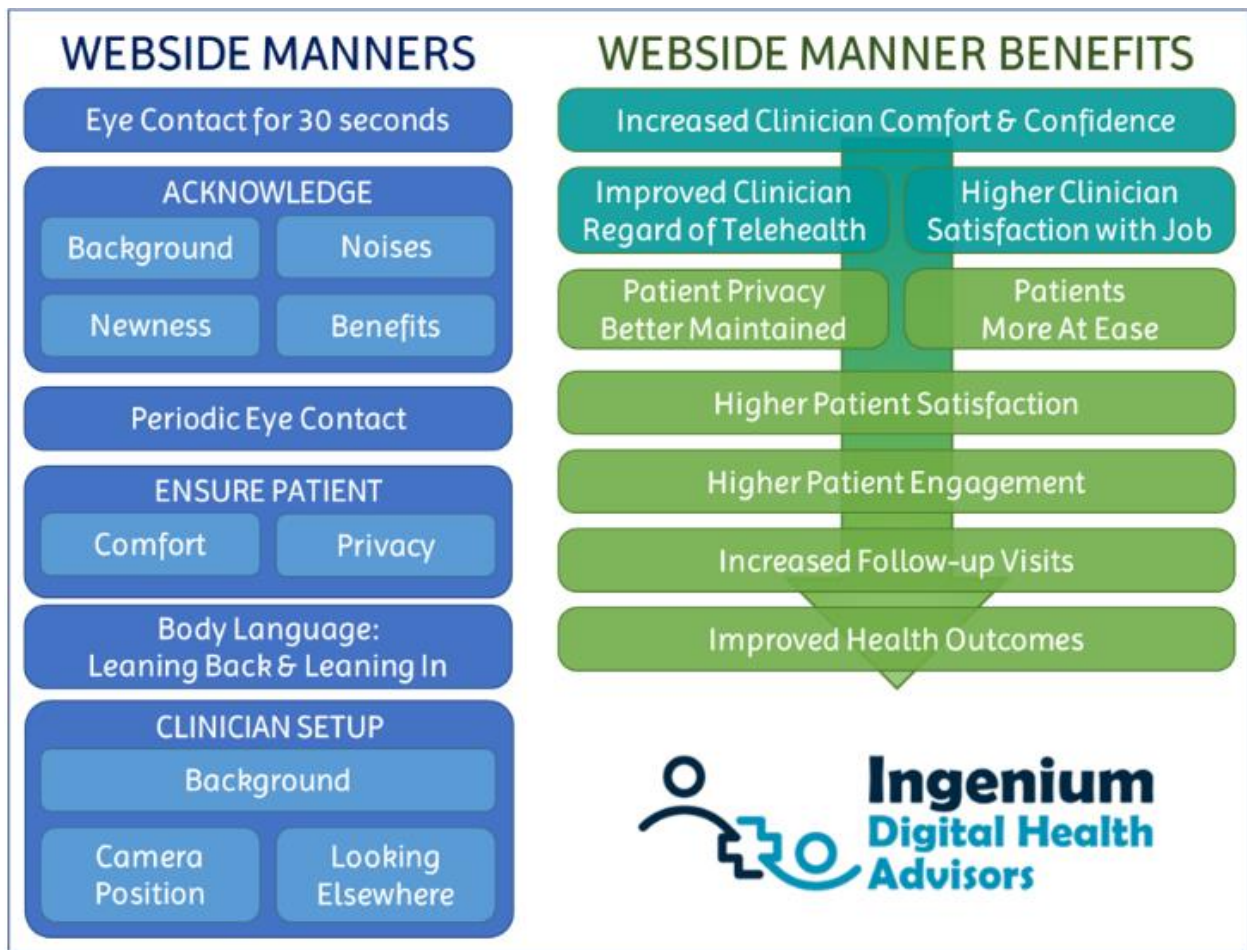
ABOUT CHRISTIAN MILASTER

Christian Milaster optimizes Telehealth Services for health systems, health centers and clinics; and advises Digital Health startups and established Digital Health solution and service providers. He is a Master Builder of Digital Health and Telehealth Programs and the Founder & CEO of Ingenium Digital Health Advisors, a boutique consultancy focused on enabling the delivery of extraordinary care.

Born, raised, and educated as an Engineer in Germany, Christian started his career at IBM Global Services before joining the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, where he worked for 12 years in various roles before launching Ingenium in 2012.

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