

Babel Babble: Physicians' Use of Unclassified Medical Jargon with Patients

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Objective: To describe physicians' use of jargon with diabetes patients with limited health literacy. **Methods:** We audiotaped 74 outpatient encounters and coded unclassified jargon, assigning each term a clinical function. We administered telephone questionnaires to determine if comprehension of diabetes-related jargon varied with context. **Results:** Eighty-one percent of encounters contained at least one unclassified jargon term (mean of 4/visit). Thirty-seven percent of jargon use occurred

when making recommendations, and 29% when providing health education. Patient comprehension rates were generally low and never reached adequate thresholds. **Conclusion:** Physicians caring for patients with limited health literacy employ unclassified jargon during key clinical functions.

Key words: jargon, communication, health literacy, diabetes mellitus

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