

SUMMARISING

Summarising is one of the most important of all information gathering skills.

What is summarising?

Summarising is the deliberate step of making an explicit verbal summary to the patient of the information gathered so far. There are two kinds of summary: internal summary which focuses on a specific part of the interview and end summary which concisely pulls together the entire interview. Used periodically throughout the interview, summarising is a key method of ensuring accuracy in the consultation.

Doctor: "Can I just see if I've got this right, you've had indigestion before, but for the last few weeks you've had increasing problems with a sharp pain at the front of your chest, accompanied by wind and acid, it's stopping you from sleeping, it's made worse by drink and you were wondering if the painkillers were to blame. Is that right? (Pause...)"

Patient: "Yes, and I can't afford to be ill now with John being so poorly, I don't know how I'm going to cope"

Why is internal summary a key skill in exploring the patient's problems?

The advantages of internal summary for patients:

- clearly demonstrates that you have been listening
- demonstrates that you are interested and care about getting things right
- offers a collaborative approach to problem solving
- allows the patient to check your understanding and thoughts
- gives the patient an opportunity to either confirm or correct your interpretation and add in missing areas
- invites and allows the patient to go further in explaining their problems and thoughts by acting as a facilitative opening
- demonstrates the doctor's interest in the illness as well as the disease aspects of the patient's story

The advantages of internal summary for the doctor:

- maximises accurate information gathering by allowing you to check the accuracy of what you think the patient has said and rectify any misconceptions; promotes mutually understood common ground
- provides a space for you to review what you have already covered
- allows you to order your thoughts and clarify in your mind what you are not sure about and what aspect of the story you need to explore next
- allows you to separate and consider both disease and illness