

When interactions between patients living with diabetes and professionals go wrong: a conversation analysis approach

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Diabetes is a chronic disease, except for its gestational variant. According to the WHO (2023), it affects 8.5% of adults aged 18 years and older. The majority of these cases concern type 2, which is typically developed later on in life and is partially related to lifestyle. Treatment of diabetes involves everyday decision-making by patients about their diet as well as, for insulin-dependent patients, about the amount of insulin to be injected. This constant everyday decision making implies then a strong and permanent involvement of the patients in their treatment and regular contacts with healthcare professionals. However, interactions with healthcare professionals sometimes do not develop in a way that patients consider adequate.

This article offers a qualitative analysis of instances of troubles-telling threads on a diabetes forum concerning interactions with healthcare professionals where patients felt that the interaction did not evolve adequately. Our aim is to offer a clearer understanding of in what respect the interaction went wrong, but also of how the patient community on the forum tries to offer support and advice for those cases.

The study relies on conversation analysis and discursive psychology, and shows recurrent features of both troubles-telling by the patient (namely announcement, stake inoculation and self-deprecation) and of troubles-receiving by the other forum members (namely appreciation, second stories, escalation).

Comparing with earlier work, our analysis shows how inadequate questions or reactions of health professionals are judged very differently from those of family members, with the former being judged more harshly for what seems a lack of professional competence. However, our study also shows that the reaction of the patient community on the one hand evidences overall support and sympathy for the patient through sharing similar experiences, but on the other hand strongly underlines the need to continue seeking medical support as a person living with diabetes.

Through this analysis, we contribute to offering a clearer view of in which respect patients feel that their interaction with healthcare professionals may evolve in an adequate way, as well as of a particularly important function of patient fora, namely allowing patients to tell troubles about others' expectations and to receive support and advice for these circumstances that put a heavy emotional burden on them.