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Language Matters: Patients’ Emic Conceptions of Medical Vocabulary in Two Community Health Clinics in St. Louis

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St. Louis is referred to as the sexually transmitted disease capital of the U.S. Since STIs are a significant public health concern in this region, it is important to improve provider-patient communication because in medical practice, optimal communication results in measurable benefits, such as shorter hospital stays, fewer complications, better adherence to treatment, increased patient satisfaction and understanding, and decreased anxiety, uncertainty and likelihood of litigation.

This is an important issue because many patients (such as those from less education history) do not accurately understand the meanings of many biomedical terms that are frequently used in clinic visits. My project’s primary aim is uncovering patients’ emic conception of medical terminology and how that compares and contrasts with that of the commonly held medical viewpoint of these terms. It is important to elicit and gain an understanding of the patient population’s emic conception of medical terminology because it has applications for improving communication.

A summary of project results includes that there was great variability in the way that different patients interpret and associate meaning with STI-related terminology, and patients’ emic conception of many words differed from that of the commonly held medical viewpoint. Many of the individuals estimated that there is a significant number of medical terms that they don’t understand—for example, Interviewee #7 said that “most time…6 or 7 medical words per visit is hard to understand.”