

Study: Eye contact with patients builds trust in doctors

Make eye contact with your doctors? Then you probably trust them more.

That's the finding of a new Northwestern Medicine study, published in the *Journal of Participatory Medicine*. The study, which used videotapes of doctors' visits, also found that longer visits and a few "social touches" such as handshakes improved empathy scores.

Feinberg and McCormick Prof. Enid Montague, the first author of the study, said the goal is to ultimately pinpoint the most patient-friendly ways for doctors to act.

"The goal is to one day engineer systems and technologies that encourage the right amount of physician eye contact and other non-verbal social communication," Montague said. "As we collect more data we can build models that tell us exactly how much eye contact is needed to help patients trust and connect with a doctor, and design tools and technology that help doctors stay connected to patients."

Researchers collected data from 110 first-time encounters between doctors and patients. The patients filled out questionnaires, answering questions about their perception of the doctor's empathy and how much they liked the doctor. Researchers then analyzed the recordings of the visits.

"Simple things such as eye contact can have a big impact on our healthcare system as a whole," Montague said. "If patients feel like their doctors aren't being empathetic, then we are more likely to see patients who aren't returning to care, who aren't adhering to medical advice, who aren't seeking care, who aren't staying with the same providers. If they switch providers, that's very costly for the healthcare system."

— *Joseph Diebold*