

# The Influence of Face Gaze by Physicians on Patient Trust: an Observational Study



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To the Editor: Face gaze, a nonverbal behavior strongly felt by patients, is a proxy for physician's interest, attentiveness, observation, noticing the patient, and myriad mutual benefits.<sup>1,2</sup> Therefore, the finding by Jongerius et al. that more face gaze may be associated with *lower* patient trust and unchanged perceived empathy or distress<sup>3</sup> is not only unexpected but frankly disturbing. However, while seemingly carefully executed, the study is actually hardly fit to address this quintessential question.

First, no information was provided on the patients' problems, but judging from their level of distress (close to 1= "not at all") they were relatively young (mean 58 years old) and healthy, quite unlike our usual older patients with chronic multi-morbidity whose vulnerable situation makes their needs for empathy and trust an integral part of the encounter. Moreover, when distress is so meager to begin with, any changes may be questionable, even when statistically significant.

Second, most observations studied were very short for a *first* patient-physician encounter: 50% lasted 14 min or less, and some were 3 min long. In 76%, physical examination was not performed, surely a marker of a relatively simple visit, raising doubts when grave issues of patients' empathy and trust are evaluated.

Finally, the few physicians participating were internal medicine residents in training, not certified in either internal medicine, primary care, or any specialty. Current residents spend just 9–12% in direct patient care vs. 40–51% on computer work.<sup>4</sup> Median dwell time of physicians' face gaze was 1.0 s (Table 2), highlighting the brief ("augenblick") and atypical nature of the interactions studied.

Therefore, even deducting the obviously "artificial" elements in the encounters studied (special glasses, video camera), the conclusions need hardly affect all that we practice, teach, and believe in. Namely, that "face gaze" is an essential, indispensable part of physicians' attentiveness to the patient, enabling better understanding of the patient, the overt expression of empathy and commitment to help, and an important facilitator of the delivery of patient-centered care.<sup>1,2</sup>

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#### Declarations:

**Conflict of Interest:** The author declares that does not have a conflict of interest.

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