

AHRQ Uncertainty Grant  
SP Uncertainty Encounter Template

Case Title: Abdominal Pain/Female/Primary/Inquisitive-Inquiring

Standardized Patient Name: Tiffany O'Donnell

Gender: Female

Age Range: 40 y/o

Setting: Emergency Department

Primary vs. Sign-Out Patient: Primary

Emotional State: Inquisitive/Inquiring

Initial Presenting Symptoms: Abdominal Pain

Symptoms: Ongoing (on a scale, report as 3 out 10)

## SP Case Summary Guide

### Summary of the Scenario:

You are a 40-year-old female patient with kidney stones, and you came to the Emergency Department after developing abdominal pain yesterday after eating dinner. You have not experienced abdominal pain like this before. The pain was crampy and located in the upper part of your abdomen pain. The pain has persisted since yesterday so you decided to come to the ED.

Your symptoms were present upon arrival to the ED and they have not improved.

Upon arrival to the ED a series of tests (Lab testing, ultrasound of your gallbladder, urine pregnancy test) was performed and you are awaiting the results.

You are awaiting results. You feel glad to be in the ED getting testing because you have no idea what could have caused such an unusual pain.

### Demeanor / Personality and emotional starting point:

*Inquisitive / Inquiring*

*For the SP, to better comprehend the patient's demeanor:*

<b>Feelings</b>	<p><i>INQUISITIVE/INQUIRING: Is it safe for me to go, how do you know that XYZ won't happen.</i></p> <p><i>This patient is genuinely interested in understanding what is going on and asks many questions. This is the person who has gone online, has spoken to friends, and is greatly invested in their own care and eager and interested to know what is going on and what should be done next. As such, the patient asks probing questions throughout the entire conversation based on what the provider says.</i></p> <p><i>When/if the physician indicates that no specific diagnosis has been found the patient responds in an inquiring manner: "Hmm, that's interesting...how unexpected, I was sure you would find something."</i></p> <p><i>The questions are not overly aggressive or suggests that the physician has done anything wrong, but rather represents a patient inquiring about everything related to his/her care.</i></p>
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	<p><i>Note about emotional state—this should be considered a starting point for the conversation. If you start as inquiring and the physician does a good job of completing the checklist and addressing your questions, it is okay to become progressively more reassured during the course of the interview.</i></p>
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**Instructions for the SP during the conversation:**

- Greet the physician upon entry into room.
- Ask inquiring questions regarding your symptoms.
- Inquire with a curious nature, about what the results signify when they are disclosed to you as normal.
  - So, what do normal results mean?
- Ask what the physician sees in your evaluation that can explain your symptoms.
- When/if the physician indicates that no specific diagnosis has been found, you respond in an inquiring manner.
- You can express your curiosity with the following phrases at appropriate parts of the conversation:
  - “I read online to read about my symptoms, is that alright?”
  - “I wonder what else could be going on.”
  - “How do you know that I won’t develop worse symptoms?”
- INSTRUCTIONS FOR SPECIFIC CHECKLIST ITEMS
  - *Item 2: Anyone to be included in conversation, if the physician asks if you want to call anyone to be included in the conversation, ask to call your HUSBAND (dial 215-503-5507 on your cell phone, then subtly hang up the phone and put it on the table as if it is on speakerphone).*
  - *Item 7: Anything else expected during visit, if the physician asks if you were expecting anything else to be done during the visit, state that you were NOT EXPECTING any other testing.*

**Questions for the SP to ask the physician** (goal with these questions is to not prompt a specific checklist item but rather to provide a prompt for ongoing conversation, if needed. Avoid questions that could lead to specific prompting of checklist items.)

- “So, what is next?”
- “Should I be concerned about this?”
- “So, what do I tell my family?”

**Closing Comment (if needed):**\* I was hoping to get an answer today, but thanks for explaining things to me. I am still curious about what is happening, but I’m all set to go home now.

\*Only use this closing comment if the physician is no longer making any progress through the checklist and not responding to generic prompts provided below.

Specific comments for each item on the checklist relevant to this case:

## INTRODUCTION

1. Explain to the patient that they are being discharged.  
**YES if:** *Physician makes reference to patient being discharged or going home before discussing the result.*
2. Ask if there is anyone else that the patient wishes to have included in this conversation in person and/or by phone.  
**YES if:** *Physician asks if there are any other people the patient would like to be included before discussing results or next steps.*  
**SP INSTRUCTION:** *if the physician asks if you want to call anyone to be included in the conversation, ask to call your HUSBAND (dial 215-503-5507 on your cell phone, then subtly hang up the phone and put it on the table as if it is on speakerphone) (if asked)*

## TEST RESULTS/ED SUMMARY

3. Clearly state that either “**life-threatening**” or “**dangerous**” conditions have not been found.  
**YES if:** *Physician specifically uses EITHER the term “dangerous” or “life-threatening” and explains that these conditions have not been found*  
**Example:** *“We didn’t find any life-threatening conditions for you today.” Or “Your results did not show any dangerous conditions.”*  
**NO if:** *Physician uses other words/phrases (e.g. “emergencies” or “serious”)*  
**Example:** *“Once we don’t find any serious conditions, it’s safe to go home.”*
4. Discuss diagnoses that were considered (using both medical and lay terminology).  
**YES if:** *Physician gives at least a lay terminology description for at least one diagnosis considered.*  
**Example:** *“Today we looked for several things to explain what was causing your abdominal pain. We did tests to look for infection in the gallbladder, intestines, and urine as well as inflammation of the pancreas.” OR “Today we looked for several things to see why you were having abdominal pain. We did blood and urine tests to look for things that could cause you to have abdominal pain.”*  
**NO if:** *Physician only uses medical terminology without validating understanding of these terms OR uses broad statement to discuss what was considered.*  
**Example:** *“We were looking for cholecystitis, biliary colic, or irritable bowel disease” or “We were looking for any problems in your abdomen.”*
5. Communicate relevant results of tests to patients (normal or abnormal)  
**YES if:** *Physician puts any normal or abnormal results into clinical context for the patient.*

**Example:** “Your laboratory testing was normal. Given your results, we do not feel you are having an infection of your gallbladder, inflammation of your pancreas, or other infection of the urine.”

**NO if:** Physician states normal findings, but not with any context or explanation of relevance.

**Example:** “Your blood tests and ultrasound were normal”

6. Ask patient if there are any questions about testing and/or results

**YES if:** Physician asks for questions immediately after explaining the testing/result.

7. Ask patient if they were expecting anything else to be done during their encounter - if yes, address reasons not done

**YES if:** Physician asks whether patient was expecting anything else to be done – this may include questioning about anticipated tests, consults, or other needs.

**Example:** “Were there any other tests you were expecting to have done today?”

**NO if:** Physician discusses additional testing, but the physician does not explicitly ask whether patient was expecting anything else to be done. Regardless of whether a patient has already asked about or requested additional tests (e.g. MRI), the physician **MUST EXPLICITLY** ask the patient about any other expectations.

**SP INSTRUCTION:** state that you were **NOT EXPECTING** to have any other testing done (if asked)

## **NO/UNCERTAIN DIAGNOSIS**

8. Discuss possible alternate or working diagnoses

**YES if:** Physician mentions other possible diagnoses using a lay terminology description (can also use medical name, but needs to include a lay description).

**Examples:** “I think your abdominal pain may be related to irritation of the stomach lining” or “Your abdominal pain may be from muscle cramps or acid reflux.” OR “I am not really sure what is causing your abdominal pain right now. I would like you to follow-up with your doctor for additional testing.”

9. Clearly state that there is a not a confirmed explanation (diagnosis) for what the patient has been experiencing

**YES if:** Physician informs the patient that there is not currently an explanation for their symptoms. This can be done using words such “uncertain diagnosis” or “no cause found” or “we do not know what is causing your abdominal pain.” It is OK if the physician also offers some possible explanations for symptoms which are diagnoses that are not able to be confirmed in the emergency department.

**Example:** “At this time, we do not know why you have abdominal pain. It may be due to irritation of your stomach lining; however, with the tools we have available, we can’t tell you for sure here in the emergency department.”

**NO if:** Physician states that “there is nothing wrong with you” or some other global statement about the patient having nothing wrong (instead of a focus on cause of symptoms)

10. Validates the patient’s symptoms

**YES if:** Physician makes an empathetic statement re-assuring the patient that they understand/believe that they are still experiencing symptoms (e.g. pain)

**Example:** “I understand that you are in pain. Even though our tests have not found a cause of your pain, that doesn’t mean that you are not experiencing pain.”

11. Discuss that the ED role is to identify conditions that require immediate attention

**YES if:** Physician conveys the idea that the role of the ED/observation unit is to identify and address conditions that require urgent evaluation or management

**Example:** “Our job as emergency medicine physicians is to find immediately life-threatening problems.” OR “The tests that we run in the emergency department are focused on finding problems that need immediate treatment.”

12. Normalize leaving the ED with uncertainty

**YES if:** Physician explains that not all conditions can be diagnosed, as some things just get better with symptom support.

**Example:** “For many patients, we are able to ‘rule out’ lots of dangerous things, but we can’t give them an exact name for what is happening.” OR “A lot of our patients go home without a clear explanation for their symptoms.”

## NEXT STEPS/FOLLOW UP

13. Suggest realistic expectations / trajectory for symptoms

**YES if:** Physician addresses what to expect for a timeline or course of symptoms. In some cases, this may be a clear statement of not knowing how long symptoms may continue (it is okay for there to be uncertainty).

**Examples:** “Although I cannot tell you the exact cause of your abdominal pain, I am hopeful that the normal laboratory results will mean that the symptoms will go away soon.” OR “At this point, I can’t tell you how long this pain may continue.”

14. Discuss next tests that are needed, if any

**YES if:** Physician discusses any potential next tests that may help further explain the cause of symptoms, or clearly states that no further testing is needed.

**Examples:** “Your outpatient doctor will help to decide if you need more tests – sometimes people get better without any more testing after the ED.” OR

*“abdominal pain with a normal blood work is reassuring, and I do not think you need any additional testing right now, unless your symptoms come back.”*

15. Discuss who to see next AND in what timeframe

**YES if:** *Physician discusses both who the follow-up care should be with AND when it should ideally occur, or physician explicitly states that no follow-up is needed.*

**NO if:** *Physician does not address BOTH who and when for the follow up.*

## HOME CARE

16. Discuss a plan for managing symptoms at home

**YES if:** *Physician provides at least one suggestion for how to treat/manage symptoms after leaving the emergency department. Can be medication, another therapy, or even a suggestion such as “try to eat a bland diet to give your colon and intestines a chance to recover.”*

17. Discuss any medication changes.

**YES if:** *Physician specifically discusses whether new medication has been prescribed and/or existing medication is to be stopped. Or physician states that there are no medication changes.*

**NO if:** *Physician does not address medications at all*

18. Ask patient if there are any questions and/or anticipated problems related to next steps (self-care and future medical care) after discharge

**YES if:** *Physician asks whether patient has questions about and/or anticipated problems related to managing symptoms or other tasks related to caring for oneself after discharge and/or obtaining future medical care (such as making appointments, identifying specialists, etc) after discharge.*

## REASONS TO RETURN

19. Discuss what symptoms should prompt immediate return to the ED

**YES if:** *Physician provides detail about specific symptoms or other events (such as lack of resolution of specific symptoms within XX timeframe or development of new symptoms) that should prompt return to the ED*

**Example:** *“If your pain comes back in the next 1-2 days and it is not improving with antacids, or if you start throwing up then you should return to the ER immediately”*

**NO if:** *Physician makes only vague statements about reasons to return, such as “return if you feel worse”*

## GENERAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

20. Make eye contact

**YES if:** *repeated and/or sustained eye contact.*

21. Ask patient if there are any other questions or concerns