

Improving hospital care of people with dementia

Ideas for staff

People with dementia may have a memory span of 30 seconds, and may forget why they are in your hospital. They may try to find a familiar face or place, by walking out. Improving care for people with dementia is about cultural change, continuing education and involving families and carers.

Here are some ideas for you to consider in caring for patients with dementia. These ideas may suit some hospitals better than others.



Communicate sensitively with patients with cognitive impairment...

- Have different expectations of cognitively impaired patients. For example, you may need to introduce yourself on a regular basis. Make every communication with someone who is confused a first meeting, no matter how many times you have met them.

For many staff in Ballarat Health Services, the presence of the Cognitive Impairment Identifier (CII) on a patient's bedside improves staff communication with the patient. They pay more attention to communicating, are more tolerant and understanding, take more time with the patient, and change their expectations.

- Use simple statements with a reassuring voice tone and manner. Use body language to reinforce messages. Become familiar with the person's way of communicating, and be prepared to adopt it. Watch for non-verbal cues indicating distress. Validate the person's reality.
- Access interpreting services when required for people of diverse cultural backgrounds, preferably using interpreters with a sound understanding of dementia. Interpreters should also be used for gaining informed consent.
- Where possible, build up a vocabulary in various languages of words like toilet, bowels, wee, and poo, which can help alleviate patient anxiety.
- Be patient and respectful when caring for confused people in your hospital.

Simplify hospital processes and behaviours...

- Try to minimise the number of staff interacting with the person.

Support a dementia-friendly environment...

- Each person has a unique relationship with the environment, often manifested by their behaviour. Small items from home, such as a photograph or picture, can help ease anxiety for a person with dementia. A quiet physical environment can also minimise stress.

Communicate with the patient's health services outside the hospital...

- Most people with dementia live in their own homes, and their community support services can assist them to maintain their independence and individuality. GPs and community support services can help minimise disruption, disorientation and potential deterioration caused by admission to hospitals. They also assist with a smooth transition to and from hospital.

Communicate with carers of patients with cognitive impairment...

- Listen to carers' opinions, and seek and use their input for: care planning; caring for people with agitated behaviours; developing appropriate responses to issues such as confusion, continence, pain management, and depression; discharge planning. Early and ongoing involvement of carers is the key to successful discharge outcomes.
- Use carers in communicating with patients.
- Provide appropriate, relevant, and timely information to the carer about admission procedures, the condition of the patient, treatment, post-discharge care, and accessing necessary aids and equipment, such as continence pads. Include contact details for support staff, such as social worker and Patient Representative.
- Be prepared to provide reassurance and explanations to carers regarding uncharacteristic behaviour of a patient with dementia.

Gippsland Health Services Consortium has developed information packages to loan to carers of patients with dementia.

Validate the carer's role in all stages of care...

- Develop protocols for involving the carer in the patient's treatment, depending on the carer's willingness, and the patient's consent. Deal with this sensitively, as some carers find too much involvement traumatic for them.

This sheet is one of a four-part series, Improving hospital care of people with dementia. See also 'Ideas for managers on culture change', 'Ideas for managers on education' and 'Ideas for supporting carer relationships'.

Full evaluation report and 'Ideas' series available at www.health.vic.gov.au/agedcare/

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