

2. Improving communication

Best care for older people in hospital

What is it?

Communication is much more than just providing information. It is a shared process in which participants exchange information, ideas and feelings to create mutual understanding and shared meaning.¹

Communication is reflective of person-centred care practices, whereby an older person is placed at the centre of a collaborative partnership with hospital staff.

The communication process is an intervention; you need to be mindful of its impact during every encounter.¹ All hospital staff have a shared role in improving communication with older patients and their family and carers while in hospital.

This factsheet will outline ways to improve communication with patients, families and carers.

Why is it important?

- There is much room for improvement in the area of communication. The majority of complaints received by health services are related to dissatisfaction with the person's experience of communication.²
- People wish to be engaged in healthcare discussions in a way they can understand.³ They want to know what you are doing and why.
- Effective communication is one way of enhancing an older person's experience of and participation in their healthcare, leading to better health outcomes.⁴
- Improving communication:
 - Empowers older people – knowing and understanding what is happening, what to do and where to get help when needed.⁵
 - Enables older people to express their views and beliefs, identifying ‘ “what matters to them” ’ rather than ‘ “what is the matter with them” ’.⁶
 - Increases a person's capacity to manage their health condition(s).

- Requires clear expression from the person delivering the message and the full comprehension of the person receiving the message within a two-way dialogue.

How can you improve your communication with older people?

As an individual:

- Be mindful that an admission to hospital can be a major life event for some older people.
- Introduce yourself, explaining your role and why you are seeing the person.
- Ask the older person how they would like to be addressed, making eye contact and engaging in general conversation.
- Gain consent to involve the family or carers. They can provide important information about the older person's life.
- Screen, assess and adjust the way you respond to people who have vision, hearing, speech or cognitive impairment.
- Adjust your own voice, tone and body posture to demonstrate respect and interest.
- Listen and support an older person to express their needs and wants.
- Be mindful of not using patronising language like ‘love’ or ‘dear’ and consider how your own attitudes and value base to ageing may influence the encounter.
- Don't refer to the person as a task, bed number or diagnosis either directly or to colleagues on the ward (acknowledging privacy and confidentiality concerns).
- Avoid using acronyms for diagnoses, hospital wards, service providers etc. that are likely to be unfamiliar to older people.
- Be sensitive to the potential impact of low literacy levels, in particular health literacy.

- Use language-specific interpreters for all important conversations.
- Use language aids to assist with day-to-day care.
- Encourage the older person to use the ‘ask me 3’ questions – ‘“what is my main problem?”’; ‘“what do I need to do?”’ and ‘“why is it important for me to do this?”’.⁷

As a team:

- Decide who will engage the older person and their family or carer in difficult conversations.
- Decide which team members will be involved in the conversations.
- Nominate one member of the team to lead the conversation.
- Discuss the routines of the hospital and explain when the older person and their family or carers will have the opportunity to discuss their concerns with the doctor/treating team.
- Provide the older person with the number of the person they can contact post discharge if they have any questions.

Consider simple adjustments:

- Check that lighting is adequate.
- Reduce reflective glare/visual distractions.
- Reduce background noise.
- Encourage the patient to use their hearing aids or amplifiers and ensure they are within reach.
- Provide quality written materials in plain language/easy English/alternative languages.
- Ensure the room set-up is as comfortable as possible when having family and carer meetings.
- Consider and respect privacy and gender differences in shared wards.

Want to know more?

Older people in hospital

www.health.vic.gov.au/older-people-in-hospital

[National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards](#), 2011, Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care. <http://www.safetyandquality.gov.au/our-work/clinical-communications/patient-clinician-communication/>.

The Center to Advance Palliative Care (USA) has developed a training tool and guide with ten important steps for quality palliative care. It is designed for health professionals and their families and carers:

Center for Advance Palliative Care (CAPC), 2013, [Palliative Care and the Human Connection: Ten Steps for What To Say and Do](#). Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kQ3PUyhmPQ>

The [Always Events](#) framework is a strategy to help health care leaders identify, develop and achieve reliability in person and family-centred care delivery processes.

<http://www.ih.org/engage/Initiatives/PatientFamilyCenteredCare/Pages/AlwaysEvents.aspx>

See Factsheet 11. *References* for references cited in this factsheet.

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Available at www.health.vic.gov.au/older-people-in-hospital

Improving communication with older people in hospital

As an individual consider these ways to improve your communication with older people



introduce yourself and your role
listen to and support the person's needs/wants
ask them about themselves
find out 'what matters to them'
be mindful of not using patronising and de-personalising language
avoid jargon
adjust your voice, tone, body posture, eye contact
use professional interpreters
be sensitive to diverse levels of health literacy

As a team member consider these ways to improve your communication with older people



decide who will engage the older person and their family and carers in difficult conversations
decide which team members will be involved in discussions
discuss hospital routines and common procedures with the older person
explain how and when older people can discuss concerns with appropriate team members
encourage the older person to 'ask me 3' questions – 'what is my main problem?', 'what do I need to do?' and 'why is it important for me to do this?'

Consider these simple environmental adjustments



check for adequate lighting
reduce glare and distractions
reduce background noise
encourage the use of hearing aids, glasses, false teeth etc.
ensure all necessary items are within reach
provide quality written materials
ensure comfortable room set-ups for discussions
respect privacy and gender differences