Attention, courtesy and patience: how to talk to patients effectively

Communication skills are vital for putting patients at ease and eliciting information, advises Nicola Davies

The quality and quantity of training that nursing students receive on how to address patients has considerable room for improvement.

Considering that communication is a major part of patient care, it is surprising that nursing students learn the majority of these skills ad hoc during placements rather than being taught them.

There are many communication challenges that nurses will encounter every day. These include relaying information about illnesses, addressing problems in people’s personal lives during illness, handling distress and helping patients face the prospect of chronic illness.

For nursing students who are encountering these challenges for the first time, here are some pointers to bear in mind:

› Introduce yourself. You will make a favourable impression if you show initiative by introducing yourself to patients rather than waiting for the patient or someone else to make introductions. Say your name clearly and confidently and offer a warm smile.

› Dress appropriately. You want to come across as professional, competent and intelligent, so dress the part. Patients will form their first impressions of you simply by looking at your outward appearance.

› Pay attention to body language. Non-verbal communication such as posture, eye contact and the way you hold or move your arms can detract from your words. Show the patient through your body language that you are interested: make eye contact when you speak, avoid looking at your watch and smile.

› Choose appropriate topics. When talking to patients, stay away from controversial issues like religion or politics and concentrate on the patient’s condition and its resolution. Patients are not interested in nurses’ personal problems and do not want to hear nurses gossiping about their colleagues – the same colleagues who will also be caring for them.

› Be courteous. No matter how you may feel, show kindness and courtesy to patients. Patients will be feeling vulnerable and at a disadvantage in a strange environment, with few of their everyday props to hand. They need to feel their concerns are taken seriously and that they can trust nurses. The courtesy you display towards your colleagues in front of patients will further strengthen their trust in your professionalism.

› Use reflection skills. When listening to patients speak, one way of showing your interest is to repeat to them in your own words what you have heard them saying. This also helps to clarify your understanding of their communication. Ask questions when you need to elicit relevant information, but not so many that you annoy the patient.

› Show understanding and patience. Remember that patients who you might perceive as difficult do not have it easy. They are ill and probably experiencing discomfort, sadness, frustration and any number of emotions. Your patience and understanding will help put them at ease and make things less stressful.

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