

Improving Communication Skills within the Nephrology Unit



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Communication is essential in the field of nephrology (Schell, Green, Tulsy, & Arnold, 2013). Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2017) defines communication as the act or process of transmitting information. Communication must take place between healthcare professionals and with patients. According to the *Nephrology Nursing Scope and Standards of Practice* (Gomez, 2017), the nephrology registered nurse (RN) is to maintain communication with the interdisciplinary team and others in care coordination efforts to facilitate safe and quality transitions of care and continuity of care delivery. Nephrology nurses are also responsible for assessing their own communication skills, seeking continuous improvement, and demonstrating continuous improvement of communication skills (Gomez, 2017).

Miscommunication

Miscommunication is a common occurrence in the nephrology unit. It can occur with staff members or with patients. Some reasons for miscommunication include language barriers, misinterpretation, and poor listening skills (Angelo, 2017). Miscommunication can be caused by managers or employees only speaking from their perspective of a situation and not incorporating another's perspective. Communication problems arise when dialogue is one-sided. Miscommunication can also occur when one focuses solely on words and ignores other cues, such as body language and tone of voice.

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Note: The Learning Outcome, additional statements of disclosure, and instructions for CNE evaluation can be found on page 272.

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Effective communication skills are critical in nephrology units for patients, staff members, and the organization to decrease errors, work together as an interdisciplinary team, and have smoothly running unit operations. The desire and willingness to communicate are important for maintaining safety in healthcare settings, and the lack of effective communication is the most common patient complaint. Skills needed for successful communication include verbal dialogue, active listening, interpretation of body language, empathy, confidence, charisma, and cooperativeness. Miscommunication can occur due to language barriers, misinterpretation, and poor listening skills. Effective communication skills are an essential competence for all members of the interdisciplinary team.

Key Words: Communication, nephrology, verbal, listening skills.

Hurried communication is another cause of miscommunication (Gutierrez, 2014). Nephrology nurses should be aware of the possibility of miscommunication when attempting to communicate quickly to patients or other members of the interdisciplinary team.

Ineffective Communication

There are many consequences of ineffective communication. According to McCorry and Mason (2011), lack of effective communication is the single most common cause of patient complaints. Ineffective communication in the workplace can also lead to businesses losing profits, employees, and clients (Gutierrez, 2014). A study by Zolnieriek and DiMatteo (2009) found a relationship between provider communication skills and patient adherence to treatment. There is a higher risk of nonadherence among patients whose providers communicate poorly than among patients whose providers are better communicators.

Benefits of Effective Communication

Companies benefit greatly from having employees who know how to communicate effectively (Gutierrez,

2014). Patients also benefit from effective communication from providers. Increased patient satisfaction is one benefit of good communication, and patients who are more involved in their care ask questions and raise concerns (National Forum of ESRD Networks, 2003). The desire and willingness to communicate are also important for maintaining safety in healthcare settings (Longo, 2011). Open communication is desired in nephrology units. The result of effective communication is a decrease in errors, smoother operations, improved productivity, and fewer misunderstandings (Gutierrez, 2014).

Effective Communication Skills

Skills needed for effective communication include effective verbal communication, active listening, interpretation of body language, empathy, confidence, charisma, and cooperativeness. These skills can help improve communication in nephrology units.

Effective Verbal Communication

Verbal communication should be clear and concise to minimize any chance for misunderstandings. For an environment with effective communi-

Table 1
Important Practices for Effective Verbal Communication with Patients

- Send a clear message.
- Use standard English and not slang.
- Avoid medical jargon.
- Talk to the patient, not at the patient.
- Be a good listener.
- Help the patient to be a good listener.

Source: Pietrucha, 2014

cation, all parties must make an effort to speak and behave in a polite and courteous manner (Gutierrez, 2014). When communicating verbally, speak words slowly, clearly, and audibly (Angelo, 2017).

Use words that are easy to understand. The audience can be confused by using words and sentences more complex than they need to be. Jargon should not be used when communicating with people outside a person's specialty or educational level. In addition, using medical jargon can confuse patients and create a barrier between the nurse and the patient (Gutierrez, 2014). Further, remember to simplify content when speaking to patients. The patient may not be as interested in the same level of detail as a nurse colleague. Important practices to remember when communicating with patients are included in Table 1.

The Importance of Listening

Listening is an important part of effective communication (Angelo, 2017). Problems can arise when one person is not listening to another (Gutierrez, 2014). Listeners often do not need to memorize every word, but instead, need to understand the broader context of what the other person is trying to convey. Listeners should avoid being distracted while having a conversation. This is difficult in a busy nephrology unit where there are multiple patients to treat. Being preoccupied makes it difficult to concentrate on what is being said. Avoid interrupting the other person speaking because it can signal to them

Table 2
Do's and Don'ts of Verbal Communication with Patients

- **Do** use the patient's name (but make sure to call the patient the name he/she prefers to be called).
- **Do not** interrupt the patient.
- **Do not** give the patient unsought or unrelated advice.
- **Do not** talk about yourself instead of talking about the patient.
- **Do not** tell patients you know how they feel.

Source: McCorry & Mason, 2011.

Table 3
Essential Interpersonal Skills for the Healthcare Professional

- Tactfulness
- Diplomacy
- Courtesy
- Respect
- Empathy
- Genuineness
- Appropriate self-disclosure
- Assertiveness versus aggressiveness

Source: McCorry & Mason, 2011

that you are not interested in what he or she has to say (Angelo, 2017).

Body Language

Communication between patients and their healthcare professionals begins before any words are actually spoken. It occurs when they observe each other's body language (McCorry & Mason, 2011). Body language is a large part of nonverbal communication (Angelo, 2017). Body language is also a crucial part of active listening. By making eye contact, facing the patient, or nodding in agreement, you show that you are following what is being said (Payne, Greenspan, Pfetscher, Pierce, & Pryor, 2015).

Body movements, gestures, and facial expressions are all forms of nonverbal communication. Facial expressions frequently show if individuals are happy, sad, angry, or frustrated (McCorry & Mason, 2011). Gestures, such as wringing of the hands, can indicate or be interpreted as nervousness. Eyes can communicate understanding, but they can also indicate that someone is uninterested

Table 4
Guidelines for Effective Written Communication

- Put your main idea upfront.
- Write short paragraphs.
- Use active voice.
- Use short, conventional words.
- Write short sentences (but not choppy).
- Be correct, credible, and complete.

Source: Pietrucha, 2014.

or does not understand the message. Posture can show a person's attentiveness. Sitting up straight can be a sign of attention, while slumping in the chair may signal someone is not engaged in the conversation. Biting one's lip can mean anger or nervousness (Angelo, 2017). Observing the audience's body language can help determine if they are following the intended message or conversation. Being aware of our own body language is important because body language provides clues to our level of interest and participation in the conversation.

Genuine Empathy in Communication

Empathy is important for effective communication (Angelo, 2017). Individuals are able to improve communication if they can put themselves in the other person's shoes and understand the situation from that person's view (Angelo, 2017; McCorry & Mason, 2011). By practicing empathy to colleagues and patients, tactfulness, courtesy, and respect are demonstrated.

Display empathy to colleagues by carefully listening to what they say and showing you are doing your best to understand. Empathy is displayed to patients by showing them you are paying attention to everything they attempt to communicate (McCorry & Mason, 2011).

Charisma and Influence

Persuasion is important in communication. You want the audience to see your point of view. Appear confident when speaking to colleagues and patients. Ensure that your voice is stable and enthusiastic. Listeners can be distracted by unnecessary pauses when speaking. If trying to persuade a patient or colleague to agree with a certain point or idea, know the answers to any questions they may ask. Be calm in one's demeanor, and do not dismiss or diminish a view point if someone disagrees. Express your views with conviction (Angelo, 2017).

Being Cooperative and Handling Difficult People

Cooperation and the ability to handle people with difficult personalities are important skills to master in nephrology units. Healthcare teams and patients for whom they provide care are rich with diverse personalities and perspectives. Cooperation and communication are keys to making groups run more smoothly. There will always be people who are challenging when trying to communicate with them. Nephrology nurses need to focus on changing the way we react to difficult situations instead of trying to change the people with whom we communicate. Instead of lashing out at others, we should develop and practice empathetic skills and try to understand the situation from their perspective (Angelo, 2017). Most patients with chronic kidney disease experience day-to-day stress from treatment regimens, medications, diet and fluid restrictions, changes in lifestyle, and relationships that challenge their coping skills. When a patient's coping skills become overwhelmed, the result may be challenging behavior (Russo,

2004). Some do's and don'ts of verbal communication with patients are shown in Table 2.

Communicating Confidently

A lack of confidence can hinder the delivery of verbal and nonverbal communication. Confidence in yourself and what you are saying is evident to others involved in the conversation. It also invites them to hear what you have to say. Confidence in communication can be learned, but will take time and practice. Start by practicing how to stand, smile, and greet people as they approach you (Angelo, 2017). Role play scenarios ahead of time. Table 3 lists some other essential skills to help with communicating confidently.

Preparing for Stressful Conversations

Stressful conversations can occur between healthcare professionals or with patients in the nephrology unit. The delivery of bad news to a patient or co-worker can cause a stressful conversation. A conversation that unexpectedly becomes intensely charged can lead to stress. Another type of stressful conversation is when a person feels as though he or she is being attacked.

There are several ways to prepare in advance for stressful conversations. Nephrology nurses should identify their weaknesses in communication skills when addressing certain people and talking in particular situations. The act of knowing how one reacts when feeling vulnerable can help prepare for stressful conversations. By knowing one's danger zones, nephrology nurses can anticipate vulnerabilities and improve responses. Clear, neutral, and temperate responses should be rehearsed with an honest, nonjudgmental friend (Weeks, 2013).

Written Communication

Due to technology, written communication (texts and emails) can be much faster than face-to-face communication. However, in written communication, the receiver cannot see

the body language or hear the tone of voice. This increases the chances of misinterpretation.

Technology allows people to communicate faster, but not necessarily more efficiently or more effectively. When sending a written message, read it out loud at least three times before sending it. Writing drafts of the message can also be useful (Gutierrez, 2014). Additional guidelines in effective written communication are shown in Table 4.

Power of Communication

Communication can be a nephrology nurse's greatest friend or biggest foe. Words can get one into or out of trouble. Leaders find ways to use words to their advantage. When communicating with patients or co-workers, be quick to praise and slow to condemn. Words can be used to build people up or tear them down. As effective communicators, nephrology nurses should choose to build the self-esteem of others. When attempting to empower and develop people, positive communication is essential (Phillips, 2008).

Summary

As nephrology nurses, we should assess our own communication skills, seek continuous improvement, and demonstrate continuous improvement of those skills (Gomez, 2017). Effective communication needs to be practiced by all members of the interdisciplinary team to make sure daily operations of the unit run smoothly. If all staff in nephrology units practice effective communication, then everyone will hopefully connect with each other with fewer problems (Gutierrez, 2014).

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