

# 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>
- People wish to be engaged in healthcare discussions in a way they can understand.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>
- Improving communication:
  - Empowers older people – knowing and understanding what is happening, what to do and where to get help when needed.<sup>5</sup>
  - Enables older people to express their views and beliefs, identifying ‘ “what matters to them” ’ rather than ‘ “what is the matter with them” ’.<sup>6</sup>
  - 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?”’.<sup>7</sup>

### 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](http://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](http://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