

30. Communication with NHS Staff

Undergoing treatment for any illness, including cancer, involves a great deal of communication between patients and the professionals caring for them. When this communication goes wrong it can be the source of distress and frustration. Getting it right is the shared responsibility of professionals and patients (as well as their families and loved ones).

At all times people should expect to be treated with dignity and respect. Patients rightly expect professionals to behave professionally and to be caring, honest and trustworthy. Difficulties can arise when staff are poorly trained, rushed or over-stretched and they say something unhelpful, misleading or uncaringly. On rare occasions they can simply make mistakes. Sometimes patients are given different messages from different professionals and this can understandably leave them feeling confused and less safe. At other times they can feel they are being asked to make decisions concerning their treatment that they would rather professionals made for them. However, problems sometimes occur because patients have misunderstood what they have been told, or are simply not ready to take in all the information that may be available to them. Given the number of possible communication difficulties, it is essential to be clear about the nature of the patient's concerns and the appropriate level of response.

How can I manage this problem?

- If you are unsatisfied with the communication you have had, try to let the person concerned know. Politely explain what you understand and what you don't understand from what you have been told, and how this leaves you feeling. Remember that if you do not mention your concerns there is a good chance that the staff treating you will assume that all is well.
- If you are worried about speaking to healthcare staff, bring someone with you so they can help support you. It is very normal for people to do this.
- It is advisable to write down any questions you have before going to your next appointment. You may have questions such as; What happens next? What does the treatment involve and how does it work? What are the side effects of treatment? And so on.
- If a member of staff asks you to do something you find difficult, it is better tell them immediately. For example, you could say, "I know that taking these tablets is important but I find it difficult to take them four times a day." This gives the doctor a chance to solve the problem with you.
- If you are phoning the hospital it is worth having your appointment card or letter with you, as the person you speak to may need your hospital number and other details.
- If you find communication difficult, i.e. due to language, hearing or other communication difficulties then be sure to tell the staff concerned because there may be facilities in the hospital to help support you with these difficulties.
- You may find that the information is available from another source such as the information kiosk by the lifts on Level 2 in the hospital.
- It is important to understand that not all questions can be answered immediately so be prepared for the fact that you may have to wait for an answer. However if this is the case, be sure that you know how long you can expect to wait, who to contact and how to contact them.
- If you have any remaining problem, concerns and comments about the care or service you have received, then you should contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service located on Level 2 in the main hospital. They will treat your concerns in confidence. You can discuss with them how to make a formal complaint if you wish to pursue this option.
- Consider that some problems may overlap with other directory items e.g. See Questions About My Treatment elsewhere in the directory.