

COMMUNICATION SKILLS TRAINING FOR CLINICAL STAFF WITHIN A RENAL SETTING

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PROBLEM: There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that one of the main causes of patient dissatisfaction is communication failure and local patient feedback in a large, inner city renal service reinforced this view. Also, over the last ten years reported incidences of verbal and physical aggression by patients towards staff has increased leaving staff feeling vulnerable and helpless. Clinical staff identified a skills gap in understanding and dealing with strong emotions; identifying barriers to learning and communicating across cultural boundaries. Generic training in communication skills, whilst very helpful, does not focus on the unique needs of patients with chronic kidney disease who experience a wide range of emotions at all stages of the patient pathway.

PURPOSE: The aim was to design and deliver a short course in clinical communication skills that would meet the needs of multi professional renal staff and ultimately improve this aspect of patient care. A patient centred approach was fundamental to the course aims. Also, staff wanted and needed to feel supported in their learning and able to explore the issues within a safe environment. To achieve this, the renal service approached the clinical communication unit in the local medical school to design, deliver and evaluate a course.

DESIGN: The course was set up to run as five sessions over 2 ½ days and focussed on experiential learning by working with simulated patients using clinical scenarios specifically related to renal care. The scenarios included explaining treatment options; discussing concordance; dealing with depression and anger and breaking bad news related to transplant failure. Group feedback and reflection were essential elements of the learning process. On completion of the training an assessment was conducted consisting of an observed patient consultation in the individual's practice area. Individual formative feedback identified any further learning needs.

FINDINGS: Three courses have taken place with sixteen participants on each course. Evaluation has been extremely positive with the majority of sessions rated very good or excellent. Qualitative feedback resulted in comments like: '*enormously rewarding*'; '*I wish I could send my whole team on this course*'; '*much more valuable than being talked at*' and '*this has been an eye opener for me*'. On completion of the course participants have stated that they felt more confident and competent to manage situations requiring expert communication skills. Patients have benefited from having increased opportunities for dialogue with staff who now feel more able to care for patients' emotional as well as physical wellbeing.

CONCLUSION: The experiential component of the course has been hugely successful in terms of participant satisfaction and learning outcomes. Renal specific communication skills training has enabled participants to relate the learning directly to their practice and to review the way in which this aspect of care is delivered to patients.

Building on the success of the first twelve months a rolling programme has been planned for the next two years with further developments including identifying mentors for staff requiring further support and annual follow up sessions for those completing the training.

RELEVANCE: Historically clinicians have received little or no training in communications skills. This course was set up in response to demand from front line staff who identified a learning need. Excellent clinical communication skills are key to developing a patient centred service and renal staff need to be supported to acquire these skills in a meaningful and supportive way.