

Communication Skills

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Humour and Resilience

PART OF THE 'FIRST 33 HOURS' PROGRAMME FOR NEW VOLUNTEERS AT CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL.

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Communication Skills for New Volunteers

Humour and Resilience

“I want to cheer patients up”.

Every month, we're extremely lucky to interview lots of people who are interested in taking up a volunteer role at the hospital. When we ask about the motivation for volunteering, many people answer, 'I'd like to cheer patients up' or 'I'd like to brighten their day'.

That's completely understandable, but is it always appropriate to try to cheer patients up? And how should you use humour in the hospital environment?



The hospital ward is used as a setting for a lot of comedy – you may remember the film *Carry On Doctor!* or the 1980's tv series *Only When I Laugh*. These are not very p.c. - modern entertainment set in hospitals is more 'realistic', such as the long running drama series *Holby City* and *Casualty*.

Some people have outgoing personalities and a ready smile, others are naturally taciturn. While that's a great example of stating the obvious, my point is that some people are quiet by nature and the prospect of being 'cheered up' by someone would be something they'd dread!

The ward volunteer role does require a certain amount of confidence, natural friendliness and an empathetic and encouraging personality. An essential part of the role, especially around mealtimes, is to have a positive effect on the ward ambience.

Our experienced volunteers are good at noticing things; for example, they'll notice if a patient has had her hair done and might say 'You're looking really nice today'. The compliment has to be sincere, obviously.

TIPS FOR USING HUMOUR

- Humour aimed at ourselves is more likely to be healthful.
- Humour aimed at others is more likely to be harmful.
- Don't joke about the patient's experience, although it's okay for them to do so.
- Do respond to what makes the patient laugh and build a rapport on this.
- Steer clear of any humour involving sex, ethnicity and politics.
- Some patients do not want or need to be cheered up – respond to each individual and accept that you can't make a difference for everyone.

RESILIENCE

Resilience is a great life skill. Chambers dictionary defines it as being able to recover from and withstand shock or disappointment. You'll need to keep a sense of perspective as a volunteer. You don't have a magic wand, you can't make everything better and you might, occasionally, be on the receiving end of a patient's bad temper.

If a patient is unhappy with any aspect of their care, you can help them to have a voice by completing one of the comments cards provided by the Patient Advice and Liaison service (PALS). The cards are available on every ward and information is available in Voluntary Services.

Most patients and staff are very appreciative of the time volunteers give. There are occasional exceptions. Richard, a volunteer newspaper seller, told me of an encounter with a disgruntled patient during his newspaper round. It may make you smile.

'The patient asked for a copy of a specific magazine, but unfortunately I'd sold out. The patient wasn't best pleased, and thought she'd let me know. She didn't hold back! I told her I was sorry the magazine wasn't available, and added that I was a volunteer. She replied, quick as a flash 'Well! What do you want – a medal?'

Richard, volunteer.

