

Communicating Effectively with Your Health Care Team

Communication can be difficult at any time, let alone times of great stress. The following suggestions were developed in collaboration with patients, carers and health professionals. While many may appear obvious, it is helpful to remind ourselves of the basics to achieve the best possible relationships with our care team.

Preparing for your appointment

- ✓ It is important to allow adequate time for appointments and expect the occasional delay as your health professional may need to deal with an urgent or unexpected situation. Make sure you eat well before hand, and do what you need to stay calm, for example, taking activities to distract yourself while you wait.
- ✓ Educate yourself from reliable sources beforehand such as those provided by State and National cancer organizations such as Cancer Councils, and government agencies such as the Cancer Institute. It may take a while to get your head around some of the jargon and roles of people involved in your care.
- ✓ Take a list of questions. We all absorb information in different ways so let your health professionals know whether you want more or less information at different times, and whether you respond best to written or verbal information or visual aids.

Making the most of your appointment

- ✓ Prioritize your questions and keep them relevant. Check the time available for your appointment; if you know you need a long appointment discuss this when booking your appointment. If the doctor is running late, it may be helpful to confirm the time that you have available. You may want to telephone ahead on the day to see if the clinic is running on time.
- ✓ If you don't clearly understand your health care professional, please ask for additional explanation. It can also be helpful to ask who else can provide information or provide follow-up, for example your Breast Care Nurse/Cancer Care Co-ordinator, GP, or Pharmacist. With time you will work out who is your "go to" person and how to most effectively work with your whole health care team. It can be helpful to ask about what is involved in your treatment, how to best prepare for treatment/what to take to hospital, and what to expect from your recovery.
- ✓ When you are preparing your notes for your appointment you may wish to tell your health professional about new concerns and/or changes in relation to your treatment and health, as well as share a record of your physical and emotional wellbeing. It can be helpful to bring a diary of symptoms and/or severity to help them understand the impact on your wellbeing; there are a number of SMARTapps that can help you log details so you are not just relying on your memory.
- ✓ Taking notes during your consultation can provide a

really valuable record of the information for later review and can help when sharing information with family and friends, especially if the information is complex. Research shows we all forget a large amount of the information provided. If your health professional is making notes or drawing diagrams, you could ask for a copy for you records. Some may also give you permission to record the appointment. Taking a support person with you provides "more ears" and/or a scribe; however you may need to guide the support person in how to best assist.

Skills We Can Use to Assist Communication

- ✓ As we all know, good communication is an active two-way process we may need to really work on. We can think firstly about being a good listener – fully focusing on the speakers body language, tone of voice, and other non-verbal communication. It's important to try to avoid interrupting, jumping ahead or trying to redirect the conversation until it's your turn as there may be logic in how information is presented. To check your understanding, say the information back to the health professional, before proceeding with questions.
- ✓ Use our assertiveness skills- aim to be specific and brief and use "I" statements. For example, say "I don't follow – can you say that again please?", rather than "you're being unclear". You can ask for time to consider information and to make decisions, as well as trying to understand how much negotiation is possible around care recommendations, for example, what type of follow-up arrangements and tests are planned.
- ✓ It may feel awkward but it can be helpful to provide feedback to your team so they know how to best work with you. You may want to write it out (and choose to share it or not), or choose to provide verbal feedback. It may be helpful for you to share your experience, and it may also help guide the health professionals' care of other patients.

Many of the skills we employ with our team can also be helpful within our home and social relationships. Think about how our loved ones could help, and communicate this gently but clearly. Tasks that need doing may not appear obvious to others, and we need to give others the opportunity to help, to help reduce the risk that we may feel let down at a later point. Think about a specific task or certain areas of your life that you can delegate, for example, managing children's activities, managing finances, or communicating information to others (see TOP TIPS "Managing and accepting offers of support", Headway Health, www.headwayhealth.com.au).

Managing Stress During Your Appointments

Appointments can be very stressful, and we may find some results and information distressing. We cannot always predict the nature of the information we will hear or what will be discussed. To get the most out of our appointment it can be helpful to think about the best strategies to manage these feelings as they arise.

Tips from www.helpguide.org/articles/relationships/effective-communication.htm on settling ourselves include:

- ✓ Recognize when you're becoming stressed. Your body will let you know if you're stressed – Are your muscles or your stomach tight? Are your hands clenched? Is your breath shallow? Are you “forgetting” to breathe?
- ✓ Take a moment to calm down before deciding to continue a conversation or postpone. Seek support from your support person if you have one present. Let the health professional know if you need to pause or take some time to process information.
- ✓ Quickly manage stress by taking a few deep breaths, clenching and relaxing muscles, or recalling a soothing, powerful or meaningful image (such as a loved one or place of peace, for example). The best way to rapidly and reliably relieve stress is through connecting with your senses: sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. Each person responds differently, so you need to find things that are soothing to you.
- ✓ Communicate when you are ready to proceed or decide to postpone/reschedule another appointment.

Second Opinions

It's important to be confident in your care – most people seek information and opinions about other major decisions in your life. Second opinions are common and you are entitled to seek another opinion: they are helpful for keeping health professionals up-to-date and delivering best-practice care. Second opinions are encouraged by many specialists and expected – if you do seek another opinion prepare, have relevant scans/results and be as open as possible. Consider meeting someone outside of your primary multi-disciplinary team to access a wider range of expertise.

Other Helpful Resources

- ✓ **Question prompt sheets.** These comprise of lists of common questions people in similar situations may wish to ask about a medical situation. If you find one on your particular situation it can guide your questions – we don't always know the questions to ask, (eg. see www.cancerinstitute.org.au).
- ✓ **Decision Aids.** Decision aids have been developed to help you through the process of making a complex care decision, for example choosing between different treatment options (eg: <http://eviq.org.au>; http://psych.usyd.edu.au/cemped/com_decision_aids.shtml)
- ✓ **Know Your Health Care Rights and Responsibilities**
It can be helpful to review your rights and responsibilities

as a patient of public and private health services. The Cancer Council New South Wales provide a summary of Patient Rights and Responsibilities on their website: www.cancercouncil.com.au

NSW Health also have a couple of booklets that you can access online:

“Your Health Care Rights and Responsibilities” - A Guide for NSW Health Staff, and “Your Health Care Rights and Responsibilities” - A Guide for Patients, Carers and Families. (See: www.health.nsw.gov.au/patientconcerns/Pagesyour-health-rights-responsibilities.aspx.)

If things do not go as well as hoped you may wish to look at supports offered by a wider range of services, eg:

- Other member of your care team
- State cancer council and information services
- Hospital patient liaison officers/patient representatives
- The Office of Fair Trading
- NSW Ombudsman
- Medicare Australia
- Department of Health and Ageing
- Industrial Relations Commission
- Health Care Complaints Commission

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