STUDENTS

Learning the value of providing a good handover

The handover process can be nerve-wracking for novices. A third-year student shares her advice on how to cope.

In my second year as a mental health nursing student, I was on placement on an older people’s acute mental health ward. The ward had 14 patients and information about every patient was handed over at the end of each shift by one of the nurses.

The information delivered during handover consisted of how each patient’s mental and physical health had been, as well as any outstanding tasks that needed to be completed and important meetings or appointments booked for that day or the near future.

Providing a good handover is an essential communication skill for nurses. Handovers are vital in maintaining patient safety and providing quality care, which is why they can be a stressful experience for nursing students.

Before this placement, I had only delivered handover once; during the placement I did it twice, under supervision of a qualified nurse. Despite these experiences going well, I still dread handing over. And I know I’m not the only nursing student who finds this a daunting experience.

What are we afraid of?

So why is handover so scary for students? Each time we start a clinical placement, we join a new team and it can take a while to get to know everyone. I don’t always feel comfortable presenting handover to new people, but as I get further into the placement and get to know people better, it becomes easier.
I worry about forgetting something and not handing over information I need to, which could compromise patient care. Even though this has not happened, that worry is always in the back of my mind. I get anxious about not being able to answer questions in enough depth from nurses on the oncoming shift when discussing a patient’s condition.

What I do to help myself
Developing strategies to ease my anxieties about giving handover has been useful for me. One thing that helps me feel more prepared is to have clear notes that are easy to read. My handwriting can be messy if I am in a hurry, so I try to re-write my notes before handover. This is especially helpful for morning handovers, where we only have 30-minute time slots.

If I haven’t been on shift for a few days, reading through my patients’ notes is useful. This helps me to familiarise myself with how the patient has been while I’ve been off, and make sure I am up to speed with any treatments or investigations they may have had.

The ward I was on during this placement had a handover file with a document detailing useful information about the patient, such as whether they were admitted voluntarily or were being detained under the Mental Health Act, their current risk level and dates of important meetings.

The documents, or sheets, were constantly updated and I found them a useful tool when giving handover. When discussing each patient, staff read from the handover sheet and then added information from their own notes.

Handovers are an essential part of communication and help ensure everyone in the team knows exactly what is going on. An accurate handover is also vital to patient safety. Knowing you have handed over relevant information stops you from going home feeling stressed, and realising you have forgotten to mention something important.

Feedback and experience
It is easy to fall into the trap of comparing yourself to more experienced nursing staff, but there is no training for handovers – they are a learn-on-the-job kind of thing – and comparing yourself to others will only knock your confidence.

You can always ask for feedback from staff members after you have given handover to see if there are areas you could improve on, but the best way to become comfortable and competent is experience. I try to remind myself of this, and that the more experience I gain, the easier handovers will become.

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