

The Deaf Person in Hospital

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Most people with normal hearing, find that entering hospital causes them anxiety. For a deaf person, going to hospital can be an especially traumatic experience. Their inability to hear and to communicate can bring distress, confusion and embarrassment.

Not only is it difficult for them to communicate with the hospital staff and these, with them, but their handicap can isolate them from other patients around them. They can be left out of the general ward which often keeps patients cheerful, despite their illness and which may even aid in their recovery.

For patients who are hard of hearing or who are totally deaf, this can be a nerve-shattering experience. The doctors give all their professional help and the *guardian angels*, the nurses, give wonderful care and attention... but still they find it exasperating when they cannot hear what the doctor is saying to them. Everybody just nods his head and moves on and the poor patient is left in a world of silence and ignorance from which there seems to be no escape!

I personally feel that it is of the utmost importance that nurses and doctors should be aware of the needs of people with this handicapping condition; in fact my intention is to smooth the path of the deaf patient in hospital. Here are some hints and ways in which hospital staff can help:

1. Many patients have defective hearing; so any patient may well turn out to be deaf.
2. If patients are admitted by appointment, ask if their hearing is normal, if not, try to find out whether they have a hearing aid, and what type it is and if they can lip read.
3. Profoundly deaf people may have defective speech. In this case it would help to know the name and telephone number of a social worker with the deaf or a member of their family or someone else who can communicate with them.
4. Please remember - deaf people who are waiting in out-patients clinics will not know that their names are being called when their turn to see the doctor comes.
5. Have patience when communicating with someone whose hearing is impaired - your frustration is likely to be theirs too.
6. To overcome loneliness we all need company and conversation. For a deaf person these may present difficulties. Try to see that some attempt is made to befriend the deaf person in hospital. Nurses may not have time. But visitors could be advised that a deaf person needs frequent visiting.
7. Deaf patients who are to undergo a surgical intervention should be allowed to keep their

hearing aid up to the point of anaesthesia. It can be so distressing to them to lose their communication link at a critical moment!

8. There are five main methods of communication used by the deaf:
 - (a) Hearing aids
 - (b) Lip reading
 - (c) Finger spelling
 - (d) Sign language
 - (e) Hand writing

All patients would want to know about their progress. Deaf persons are no exception. Using one of the above mentioned methods of communication even in writing, will certainly help them psychologically and helps them gain confidence in the staff.

9. Children deaf from birth have even greater problems than acquired deafness in adults. For instance, their vocabulary is generally limited to simple words only. Like any other child, a deaf youngster longs for friendly, uncomplicated conversations. In Medical matters it is of course best to deal with the child through the parents or guardian. When possible it is essential not to separate the deaf child from his mother.
 10. Speak clearly but don't shout. Shouting at a deaf person will get you nowhere; shouting at a patient who uses a hearing aid can cause great discomfort and in some cases pain. It also reduces the clarity of speech and distorts the shape of the mouth making lip reading more difficult.
 11. Speak slightly more slowly than you do normally and be prepared to use different words if understanding seems difficult. Some words are much more difficult to lip read than others, even though they have the same meaning.
 12. Make sure that you are standing in good light, so that your face can be clearly seen. Deaf patients are often seen at ENT clinics which are usually *dark-rooms*... such environment is thus far from ideal!
 13. Don't expect someone to be able to lip read if you are eating, smoking or face down reading at the same time.
 14. If possible note the patient's degree of deafness on his or her medical records. When this information is included on the notes attached to the bed, it will save repeated explanation to doctors, nurses and visitors consequently reducing to a minimum further embarrassment and frustration to our dear friends who suffer from impaired hearing.
- Love works in ways, that are wonderful and strange.
There is nothing in life that love cannot change!