A staff training intervention to improve communication between people living with dementia and health-care professionals in hospital: the VOICE mixed-methods development and evaluation study

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Declared competing interests of authors: Rowan Harwood reports that he sat on the National Institute for Health Research Health Technology Assessment Primary Care, Community and Preventative Interventions Topic identification panel from 2014 to 2017. This panel had no relationship to the VOICE study.

Published December 2018
DOI: 10.3310/hsdr06410
Plain English summary

The VOICE mixed-methods study
Health Services and Delivery Research 2018; Vol. 6: No. 41
DOI: 10.3310/hsdr06410

NIHR Journals Library www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk
Plain English summary

People with dementia are frequently admitted to general hospitals, and often have problems communicating. Much of health care is delivered through talk. Communication problems can make the delivery of care difficult.

We video-recorded 41 encounters between 26 professionals and 26 people living with dementia, and analysed them to understand when problems arose and how skilled practitioners overcame them. We designed a 2-day communication skills training course, which we ran as a pilot, and then on six further occasions, including 45 staff from two hospitals. The course used a variety of teaching methods, including simulation (actors playing the part of patients). We evaluated the course.

Particular problems were found during requests (patients often refused) and the ‘closing’ at the end of the encounter. Agreement was more likely when requests were direct and made with a high degree of authority and, when possible, difficulties associated with the task were minimised. Closings worked better when the staff member announced the end of the task, they made a specific arrangement, their body language matched what they were saying, and they used ‘closing idioms’ (common sayings such as ‘all done and dusted’). The course ran successfully and was rated highly by participants. After the course, we measured improvements in confidence, knowledge and communication behaviours. Participants reported that they found the methods useful in practice and were still using them 1 month after the course finished. They particularly valued the simulation, the use of real life video-clips and learning in a mixed group of professionals.

We identified areas of particular communication difficulty for health-care professionals and people living with dementia, and ways in which skilled practitioners overcame them. We can improve the communication skills of (even experienced) health-care staff, and simulation is a valuable method by which to achieve this.
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This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HS&DR programme or one of its preceding programmes as project number 13/114/93. The contractual start date was in June 2015. The final report began editorial review in December 2017 and was accepted for publication in May 2018. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The HS&DR editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors’ report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the final report document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this report.

This report presents independent research funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). The views and opinions expressed by authors in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HS&DR programme or the Department of Health and Social Care. If there are verbatim quotations included in this publication the views and opinions expressed by the interviewees are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect those of the authors, those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HS&DR programme or the Department of Health and Social Care.

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