

## **LETTER TO EDITOR**

# **Nurses' Readiness to Engage Patients in Healthcare**

**Dr. Yusrita Zolkefli (Assistant Professor)**

PAPRSB Institute of Health Sciences, Universiti Brunei Darussalam.

Email: yusrita.zolkefli@ubd.edu.bn

Dear Editor,

A recent article (1) on ethical issues related to patient engagement in healthcare from the perspectives of patients, clinicians and researchers has made me reflect on nurses' readiness to engage patients. Patient engagement has received much attention in today's healthcare. Such emphasis is reflected in the expressions and emphases used to describe healthcare, with terms such as patient-centred care. While the meanings of patient engagement vary considerably, engagements may include patients to be actively involved in treatment plans and sharing their expectations and decisions (2). Not only nurses are understood to be the enablers of this engagement (3), helping and supporting the patient to be engaged in healthcare is established to be one of the duties of a professional nurse.

Such engagement is embodied in clinical activities such as bedside handover (4) and decision-making (5). This means that nurses must provide patients with as much knowledge as possible to help their understanding, include the family and support individuals. Patients usually feel humanised and respected through such engagement in their care (6). Engagement can also help avoid medical mistakes, because the patient feels empowered to ask questions when something is wrong with their care (7). However, the readiness of nurses to engage with patients is little known. Take the example of sharing information, where engagement represents one way to encourage patient participation (8) and that knowledge is required to develop patients' confidence in their ability to participate and makes the decision (9). A lack of knowledge about healthcare procedures and how to detect and report changes in their clinical conditions may affect patient engagement (10).

Furthermore, in many healthcare studies, nurse-patient communication is unfavourable as a result of poor communication skills (11). All these suggest that how health professionals interact with patients in the sharing of information, affects patient participation in their health care. The use

of professional jargon (12), for example, may decrease the patient's ability to understand, which precludes engagement. Simultaneously, challenges also come from barriers such as nursing routines work, which may deter nurses from patient communication and engagement (13). It has to be emphasised, nonetheless, that the barriers are multifaceted, for example, patient-related barriers such as low levels of health literacy have been reported to constitute key obstacles to patient engagement in the delivery of safe care (10).

Several notable studies strongly suggest that it is imperative for nurses to be interested in making the process of patient engagement work well (8, 13). Nurses need, therefore, to reflect and ask themselves whether they had provided the patient with an opportunity to engage in healthcare. It is also critical for nurses to be aware that in establishing nurse-patient relationships that contribute to meaningful patient involvement of their care, communication skills are essential (14). Not only must the nurses have strategies in place to guide patients through the engagement process (15), but they also must be more mindful of patients' resources and possibilities so that that appropriate care can be planned in cooperation with patients. Equally important is the role of the healthcare institution in general. Some experts significantly nudge governments and healthcare institutions to engage patients and other service users more robustly (16). For example, patients can be actively involved as partners in organisational re-design and evaluation of healthcare delivery (17).

As a nurse educator, it is my responsibility to engage students in critical reflection of fundamental values such as compassion and empathy. I often advise my students to put themselves in the patient's shoes to understand the value of patient engagement. It may be true that nurses are often engrossed with a wide range of clinical tasks. That said, patients may feel anxious because of their illness, and many of

them, if not all, do want to have some role and input in deciding what is going to happen to them. In a nutshell, it seems reasonable that as nurses, we must be all set and ready, to engage patients in health care. This readiness can be done by always aiming to make the patient as nurses' key priority, and always do what is best for them, which is key to good ethical practice. Let us all nurses, now reflect and rethink our interactions and actions in engaging the patient in our daily nursing care. After all the mission of Brunei's Ministry of Health, "Empowering people towards healthy people," highlights the fundamental significance of patient engagement in health care.

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