

Let's talk about sex! The story so far...

The literature suggests that sexual health issues are very poorly handled, if at all, during the rehabilitation phase of the patient's journey. Sexuality is considered to be an important aspect of holistic care, but it is not routinely addressed in healthcare settings (Allen, 2013). Singh and Sharma (2005) suggested that roughly 80% of spinal cord injuries are by men and research has historically focused on the sexual needs of men rather than women.

The aim of this study was to improve communication, regarding sexuality and sexual issues, between members of the interdisciplinary team and patients (both male and female) who have sustained a spinal cord injury. To review current practice around these issues, I looked at our admission documentation, needs assessment check list, goal setting and family meetings. A focus group, involving five members of staff, was established to develop an action plan on how to improve our communication with patients regarding these issues. Feedback from the focus group demonstrated the lack of communication between patients and staff regarding sexual health issues. I contacted 3 spinal units regarding their practice & compared it to ours.

Practice in 2014

Patients were given a 15-20 minute consultation at the end of their family meeting with the Consultant and or Social Worker.

Sexuality and sexual health issues were rarely mentioned by other members of staff.

Education programmes regarding sexual issues were not delivered to patients as part of their rehabilitation programme.

Poor use of documentation.

Staff ignored windows of opportunity to discuss sexual health issues with patients.

Focus group, made up of 2 nurses, 1 healthcare assistant, a physiotherapist and an occupational therapist, developed an action plan.

Feedback suggested :

- Training for staff
- Review documentation
- Deliver patient education programme

A Psychosexual therapist presented a one-day workshop, 30 members of staff attended the Workshop. Feedback from the group suggested that staff were aware of their failure to communicate effectively with patients, regarding sexuality and sexual health issues.

Barriers to Communication

- Embarrassment to both patient & staff
- Lack of knowledge
- Lack of training
- Lack of privacy in the ward setting
- Attitudes of staff / patients to discussing these issues

Current Practice

- Heightened awareness of the importance of Sexuality and sexual health issues among staff
- Better use of documentation on admission and when completing the needs assessment checklist with the patient
- Staff are more aware of signposting patients to appropriate services
- Access to psychosexual therapist

Recommendations

- Update patient education programme
- Deliver sex education programme as part of rehabilitation programme
- To complete a study on how patients admitted to the spinal cord injury unit, within the past year, view the information they were given regarding sexual health issues