Stay alert, stay aware

Deteriorating patients might be saved thanks to a new course for healthcare assistants, explains Sue Clarke

Healthcare assistants (HCAs) are members of a front-line workforce and are in the privileged position of being able to save lives. The ability to do this, however, depends in part on recognising deteriorating patients – yet relevant learning programmes for HCAs are not readily available.

The AWARE course at Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust is designed to teach HCAs to recognise and report deteriorating patients. The programme includes: principles and techniques for measuring physiological parameters; effective responses to adverse physiological signs; track and trigger systems, communication and record keeping.

The AWARE programme provides a framework of the knowledge and skills needed for early identification and reporting of deteriorating patients (see box). The course is taught using a variety of learning activities including quizzes, group work, discussions, scenarios, role play, decision making and keeping a workbook.

HCA Anna Webster attended the course recently and says: ‘My confidence in my ability and knowledge when dealing with a deteriorating patient has grown. My approach is more methodical and I understand exactly what my HCA role entails.’

The course is part of a series of deteriorating patient courses at the Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust, where cardiac arrest calls as a proportion of medical emergencies have fallen from 47 per cent to 43 per cent over the past two years.

Sue Clarke is senior nurse, learning beyond registration, Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust

RESOURCES
NICE guidance: acutely ill patients in hospital
tinyurl.com/NICEMDPs
RCN guidance: recognition and management of deteriorating patients
tinyurl.com/RCNMDPs

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Deteriorating patients: key skills
- Awareness of accountability.
- Observation and communication.
- Documentation and record keeping.
- Assessment of hydration and fluid management.
- Cardiac assessment.
- Neurological assessment.
- Respiratory assessment.
- Decision-making skills.

MANAGING TENSIONS IN THE WORKPLACE

In an ideal world, healthcare assistants (HCAs) and nurses work as a team. In practice, tensions between the two can undermine relationships.

Tensions are more likely when roles and responsibilities are not defined clearly and/or when teams are under-resourced.

Nurses are sometimes frustrated by the responsibilities of supervising HCAs, and might also resent it when tasks that they view as their own responsibility are undertaken by support workers. Equally, HCAs may feel that much of the care they give patients is under-valued.

A wise HCA will try to defuse such situations and should:
- Prevent tension by asking for clarity about role distinctions.
- Be clear about his or her expectations and those of their colleagues.
- Know the limits of his or her caring responsibilities.
- Accept his or her limits of proficiency and recognise when help is needed.
- Maintain clear lines of communication about patient care.
- Learn to manage emotional ups and downs.

Self-management of emotions is possibly the most powerful way for HCAs to help lower tensions between team members. The old advice – always to assume the best intentions in others – is relevant in such circumstances.

Often, tensions develop because of misunderstandings and an HCA can help improve working relationships if he or she can keep a more positive view of colleagues’ intentions.

Caring for the sick is emotionally taxing. Caregivers are more effective when they take good care of themselves as well as their patients.

Nicola Davies is a health psychologist