Using Skilled Communication to Curb Patient Aggression: Findings from a Quality Improvement Project

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Key Findings: Many inpatient acute care nurses lack the competency needed to safely avert and de-escalate aggressive patient behaviors. Pilot results suggested de-escalation trainings and resources increased nurse confidence in safely navigating aggressive encounters. This finding was in line with literature supporting the use of skilled communication to mitigate patient aggression toward nurses.

Background: Patient aggression toward nurses is becoming more common in non-mental health settings, where nurses are less prepared to handle the situation. Effective nurse-to-patient communication reduces patient aggression, while suboptimal communication can lead to and/or intensify aggressive encounters. Skilled nurse-to-patient communication supports healthy work environments by eluding or limiting patient aggression.

Aims: Use skilled communication to improve the safety of nurse-to-patient interactions at University of Utah Health:
• Gap analysis: Evaluate non-mental health nurses for baseline de-escalation communication skills
• Develop patient aggression communication skills through creating and implementing a Behavioral Emergency Response Team (BERT) program

Methods: Non-mental health nurses were invited to complete a survey measuring their attitude and skill in working with aggressive patients. A program was then developed to support nurses in using skilled communication during aggressive patient encounters, which included a de-escalation training in-service, increasing the presence of hospital security, and developing a de-escalation response team. The program was piloted in two acute areas and post-intervention surveys were collected.

Results: Baseline survey results indicated a lack of competency:
• 79.5% had never been trained in approaches for dealing with aggressive patients and visitors
• 60.8% had responded to aggression from patients or their visitors by reciprocating emotionally reactive communication

Upon providing the pilot group with a training and resources to increase skilled communication:
• 89% of participants felt capable of using skilled communication to reduce patient or visitor aggression (vs. their report of 56% at baseline)

Conclusions: The first aim of this project was met by identifying non-mental health nurses at the facility as being less skilled in communicating with aggressive patients. Accordingly, a project was designed and implemented. Pilot findings suggested training materials helped to increase nursing communication skills.

With patient aggression on the rise in non-mental health settings, it is important and urgent to provide nurses with resources to safely manage these encounters. Skilled nursing communication is an essential component of a comprehensive strategy to manage patient aggression.