



Improving the assessment and documentation of pain for patients with severe cognitive impairment on an orthopaedic trauma ward

Project team: Simon Higgs and Peter Johnston

Duration: December 2012 – December 2013

Keywords: Cognitive impairment, dementia, pain, pain assessment

Project background

Ward 19 in the Ulster Hospital is a busy, 20-bed adult orthopaedic trauma ward. The ward frequently cares for elderly patients who have suffered a traumatic fracture, a high proportion of whom may also have cognitive impairment, either from dementia or delirium. A retrospective review of patient records had been carried out focusing on admission to the ward over a month. This revealed that 19% of patients admitted to the ward had a cognitive impairment that affected their ability to communicate or report their pain to the nursing staff. The project team identified that the Abbey Pain Scale, which assesses changes in voice, facial expression, body language, and other physical changes to gauge pain levels, could provide a mechanism for nursing staff on the ward consistently to assess and record a patient's behavioural state and help them interpret changes that could indicate undertreated pain.

Aims and objectives

This project aimed to improve the treatment of pain through more accurate assessment and documentation of pain in patients with moderate to severe cognitive impairment on an orthopaedic ward. To achieve this aim, the objectives identified were to:

- Explore staff attitudes to pain assessment and documentation through workshops and focus groups
- Recruit and support 'pain champions' on the ward to facilitate the use of the Abbey Pain Scale
- Identify and implement other initiatives that would help staff care for those with dementia in a more effective way

Implications for practice

- A mixed-method approach can be effective to improve staff knowledge and skills in caring for patients, including those with dementia
- Taking a more enabling approach, in this case by recruiting and supporting pain champions, can result in improved communication between staff, patients and families
- Barriers to the introduction of the new tools may be lack of knowledge, skills and confidence

This project was supported by the FoNS Patients First Programme in partnership with The Burdett Trust for Nursing

Key activities and outcomes

• Staff questionnaire

In the first instance, the team carried out a staff survey about attitudes towards and confidence in caring for someone with a cognitive impairment. Anonymous questionnaires were sent to all nursing staff on the ward and 82% were returned. The responses highlighted a significant lack of confidence in caring for patients with cognitive impairment.

• Educational sessions

Four, two-hour education sessions, with lunch provided, were held. In total, 92% of the ward's nursing staff were able to attend a session. Each session provided an introduction to the Abbey Pain Scale (tinyurl.com/abbey-scale) and a session on cognitive impairment delivered by a specialist in older people's mental health. Following this, the project team carried out a claims, concerns and issues exercise to explore areas of staff confidence and concern. Some of the identified themes related to a lack of education in dementia care, communication difficulties (not only with patients but also between staff) and a lack of resources for caring for patients with cognitive impairment. The Abbey Pain Scale was subsequently introduced on the ward but following a snapshot audit, it became clear it was not being used consistently with patients.

• FoNS facilitator visit

A FoNS practice development facilitator visited the project team to help think about why the Abbey Pain Scale was not being used effectively and about the methods and approaches that had been used to date. Following this, the team members decided to take a different approach; they asked the ward sister to help identify several nurses who would act as 'dementia pain assessment champions'. Six volunteers were chosen to attend ongoing working group sessions scheduled over the remaining time of the project.

• Dementia pain assessment champions group sessions

The first group session was facilitated by the FoNS visitor in May 2013. It comprised a values-clarification exercise around person-centred care and a claims, concerns and issues exercise. The team watched an Alzheimer's Society video, which offers a powerful insight into what it's like to live with dementia/cognitive impairment. This direct engagement of an enthusiastic group of nursing staff as champions was pivotal to the sustainability of the project.

• Butterfly scheme

At around this time, there was a trustwide initiative to introduce the Butterfly Scheme (butterflyscheme.org.uk). The main component of this is a Butterfly symbol – a discreet identification sign that informs staff the patient has a memory impairment and that the patient wants staff to know this. The project leaders introduced the scheme and the ward champions found it helped address several communication issues that they had raised.