Patients who wander

Introduction

We sometimes care for patients who insist on walking up and down the ward with no apparent purpose. Often they will look bewildered or are unclear or unable to tell us about what they are doing. These patients are often referred to as ‘wandering’. Sometimes they try to leave the ward and in these cases we need to maintain a safe environment for them. We will never physically restrain patients but may need to take action to ensure they do not injure themselves or others.

Causes

It is very difficult to identify why a person wanders. We know that sometimes these changes are due to physiological changes in the brain but there are lots of other reasons that we should consider also.

Very often the patient does not have anything wrong with their brain, or any mental illness, but they are disorientated because of a physical illness. This person might feel lost or feel that there is something or someone missing. It might be because they are in unfamiliar surroundings and do not feel happy with where they are i.e. it’s too noisy; they do not recognise anyone; or simply do not understand what is going on. It could possibly be that they want something to eat or drink or are in pain but cannot communicate this to staff or they are bored and simply want to stretch their legs or take some exercise.

How can I help this person?

Firstly remember that they mean no harm. This behaviour can be frustrating but it is important that you do not get angry with them. If you feel they are at risk, are concerned about their behaviour or feel that it is changing, please speak to a member of staff and discuss your concerns. Sometimes just talking to these patients and reassuring them will help. If they are able and you feel able, you could go for short walk with them but do not leave the ward area, unless you advise a member of staff you are planning to. If you are a family member or carer and think your presence would calm down the patient, then please do suggest to the staff that you visit outside visiting times if you are able to.

How to do we care for this person?

Firstly it may not be appropriate to ask the patient to sit down and we may need your help with diversionary tactics. You can help us to understand how this person thinks; what are their interests are; or plan and co-ordinate your visits with other friends and relatives so that someone is able to sit and talk, have a cup of tea or go for that short walk around the ward.

Items such as memory boxes, photo albums and newspapers are useful aids. Staff will be happy to discuss ideas with you and will be flexible so you can visit outside of the usual visiting hours.

If you are aware that there are small items at home which may help keep the patient occupied and happy, then please do bring them in. Please note however, we cannot be responsible for these items, so do not bring them in if they are expensive.
Additional Strategies

The safety of the patients is always our first consideration.

If a patient repeatedly tries to leave the ward it may be appropriate for staff to accompany them on a short walk of the ward if this is considered a safe action.

Sometimes staff may not be available to do this or the patient might want to leave without supervision. On some wards patients can be fitted with a wristband with a sensor in it which will trigger an alarm for staff when the patient approaches the ward entrance. We cannot insist the patient wears this, but the system has proven to be very beneficial as it offers a patient independence but their movements can be monitored.

This would be discussed with you if it was felt that it was that the system would help maintain a safe environment. This system will never replace direct nursing supervision and we might resort to 1:1 nursing care (Specialling). This is when an additional nurse is employed to provide constant supervision for a patient in question. It is only possible when additional staff can be provided although in times when they are not available these patients are always given high priority.

If you require more information or would like to discuss the care of the person you are visiting please speak to a member of the ward team who would be happy to help you. Any information you can give us is valuable as you know the patient and their personal preferences.

Additional Information

Trust leaflets which may be of help:

- Patients at high risk of falling
- Specialling patients – staff leaflet

Useful Websites

www.wanderingnetwork.co.uk

Further Information

We endeavour to provide an excellent service at all times, but should you have any concerns please, in the first instance, raise these with the Matron, Senior Nurse or Manager on duty. If they cannot resolve your concern, please contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 01932 723553 or email pals@asph.nhs.uk. If you remain concerned, PALS can also advise upon how to raise a formal complaint.

Author: Falls Group
Department: Operations
Version: 2
Published: June 2011
Review: June 2013

We can provide interpreters for a variety of languages, information in larger print or other formats (e.g. audio) - please call us on 01932 723553.

To use the Text Relay service, prefix all numbers with 18001.