Managing Confused Patients

Problem

Confused patients present a significant challenge to nurses in many healthcare settings. The elderly population is especially at risk for confusion due to reduced ability to metabolize and excrete medications. Many older patients become confused when ill, with certain medications or after surgery. Confusion may be temporary or long lasting.

Consequence

Confused patients are at risk of falling or other injury.

Solution

Here are some suggested steps to take to address this problem.

- The first step with a confused patient is to conduct a good assessment.
  - Assess the patient for other symptoms and evaluate the admitting diagnosis.
  - Speak to the family to see whether the patient has a past history of confusion, or whether this is a new onset; if new, ask if there have been any recent changes in the patient’s life.
  - Review the patient’s medications including any over-the-counter and herbal medications.
  - Scheduled pain medications may need to be reduced in dosage or their schedule modified; medications such as sedatives and muscle relaxants can cause severe confusion if stopped abruptly.
  - Evaluate the patient’s fluid and electrolytes for any potential causes of confusion.
- Inquire whether a friend or family members can stay with the patient; having a familiar face that the patient knows and trusts is often enough to calm them down.
- Consider using a bed or chair alarm; the sound of the alarm will remind the patient not to get up and will alert the staff.
• Other precautions that nurses should take with confused patients are:
  - Frequent checks
  - Keeping a low light on in the patient’s room
  - Ensuring the call bell is within reach and answering calls quickly.

• One of the most common reasons a patient falls is when he/she is trying to get to the bathroom. Confused patients may not understand that they cannot safely stand without assistance. Precautions include:
  - Take the patient to the bathroom on a schedule and offer toileting at least every 2 hours
  - Since a confused patient is not likely to remember to use the call bell, the nurse should remain immediately available to assist the patient to prevent any falls and injury.

References

*Avoiding Common Nursing Errors*, Lisa Marcucci, MD, Editor, Lippincott Williams and Wilkins, 2010.

Note: A narrated e-Learning module of this Nugget is available at LearningNurse.com.