Caring for Dementia Patients

Problem

Dementia is an acquired condition that affects cognition and memory. Dementia is serious enough to affect a patient’s ability to function socially because of its impact on language, behaviour and thought. Nurses must be aware of the risks and have the knowledge to properly care for dementia patients.

Consequence

Failure to properly look after a dementia patient can result in serious harm and injury to the patient, and can put family and staff at risk as well.

Solution

Here are some considerations associated with caring for a dementia patient.

- The classification of dementia consists of several types including Alzheimer dementia, vascular dementia, and dementia with Lewy bodies.

- There are several other diseases like Parkinson and Huntington diseases that may have dementia as a part of their syndrome.

- Alzheimer dementia is the most common form of dementia:
  - It usually begins after the age of 65
  - Patients begin to experience memory loss and have problems finding words
  - The condition is degenerative as patients experience progressive loss of function including their ability to perform their activities of daily living.
  - Patients may become combative and have difficulty relating to others.
  - Patients can lose continence of bowel and bladder at later stages of the disease.

- Vascular dementia occurs from small vessel disease in the brain where hypoperfusion and infarcts manifest themselves.
• Vascular dementia usually occurs at an earlier age in patients with vascular risk factors such as hypertension, diabetes, hyperlipidemia and cardiovascular disease.

• Lewy body dementia is named so because of the presence of Lewy bodies in the brains of the affected patients.

• Lewy body dementia patients experience hallucinations, memory loss, language problems, and debilitating motor symptoms.

• Patients with dementia have a number of pharmacologic agents available for treatment, some with more modest success than others.

• Cholinesterase inhibitors are the main medications for Alzheimer or Lewy body type dementia.

• For patients with vascular dementia, the treatment of the underlying cardiovascular function is important to prevent repeated infarcts.

• The nurse has an obligation to keep the patient safe by ensuring that his or her whereabouts is known at all times.

• As the dementia progresses, the patient may need assistance with activities of daily living, including eating, washing and drinking.

• The nurse should employ behavioral strategies to deal with some of the agitated behaviours.

• The nurse must work with the family of the dementia patient to support them through the care of this difficult disease.

References

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