Collecting Sensitive Patient Data

Problem

Nurses are sometimes reluctant to ask certain personal and sensitive questions when obtaining a health history. These questions are often related to sexual activity and recreational / illegal drug use.

Consequence

The risk is that you will end up with an incomplete health history and may miss some important data that could affect diagnosis and treatment plans.

Solution

Here are some suggested steps to take to prevent / avoid this problem.

Attitude

- Remind yourself that as a nurse, you have a professional obligation, and that it is in the patient’s best interests, to collect ALL relevant data for a complete health history.

- Be professional and non-judgmental. Be careful of your verbal and non-verbal signals in response to the patient’s answers to your questions. This may cause the patient to stop talking or become defensive.

- Don’t ever assume that in elderly patients questions about sexual activity and recreational drug use are irrelevant.

Preparation

- Make sure the room is private and that you won’t be interrupted.

- Treat the patient with respect by addressing him formally (Mr. Smith). This encourages trust and will provide more accurate and complete information. Don’t use endearing terms such as “honey”, “love” and “dear” etc.

- Try and establish rapport with the patient and explain what you will cover during the interview. Ask him if he any questions before you start.
• Let the patient know that his answers are confidential and will be only used for diagnosis and treatment.

**Questioning**

• Speak slowly and clearly, using easy-to-understand language; avoid using medical terms and jargon.

• Phrase your questions tactfully; think before you ask.

• Start with less sensitive areas and work up to more sensitive areas such as sexual activities and illicit drug use.

• Use reassuring gestures, such as nodding your head, and phrases such as “go on” to encourage the patient to keep talking.

• Watch for nonverbal clues that indicate the patient is uncomfortable or unsure about how to answer a question. If you observe this, reassure and remind him that is important that you get all the information.

• Don’t rush or skip important facts just because the patient seems embarrassed.

• Watch out for slang or euphemisms when talking about sex or drugs; make sure you are understand exactly what the patient is talking about.

• Be especially tactful with older men, who may see a normal decrease in sexual prowess as a sign of declining health and may be reluctant to talk about any sexual problems.

• When asking questions, keep in mind that many men view sexual problems as a sign of diminished masculinity. Phrase your questions carefully and offer reassurance as needed.

**Conclusion**

• When wrapping up the interview, be sure to ask the patient if there is anything important you missed or he would like to add. Don’t rush, give him time to reflect and respond.

**Reference**


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