Problem

Nurses need to know how to effectively assess patients who may be real or perceived threats to staff or others in the environment because of their violent behaviour. While most patients are appreciate of nursing care, a few are not able to manage their aggression and may physically strike out.

Nurses must be able to recognize criteria that are associated with the risk of a tendency toward violent behavior. Knowing these, the nurse can take appropriate actions and use de-escalation techniques with these patients.

Consequence

Not anticipating potential violent behaviour on the part of a patient can increase of the risk of physical harm to the nurse and staff, other patients and the patient himself. Also, violent behaviour may interfere with the application of effective treatment and care.

Solution

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

- The major risk factors for violent behaviour include demographic characteristics, medical and psychiatric history and diagnoses, social-environmental risks, and cognitive-behavioral risks.

- Nurses should use a standardized approach to assess each of these factors to derive a patient’s risk profile and intervene before the behaviour escalates.

- From a demographic perspective, at-risk patients tend to be young, unemployed men with limited education. They have a history of violence, often stemming from early childhood, including infractions with the law, and many have been victims of violence themselves.

- At-risk patients may have experienced traumatic brain injuries, have used illicit drugs, and have antisocial or impulsive character traits. These patients may have access to a weapon and are willing to use it.
• At-risk patients are often financially, as well as socially, dependent upon others and move often.

• From a behavioral perspective, these potentially violent patients have low self-esteem, poor impulse control, and make statements about their intent to harm others.

• The above characteristics can assist nurses to recognize at-risk patients before violent behaviour begins.

• Nurses should take the following precautions with at-risk patients:
  ▪ Keep an eye on the at-risk patient at all times.
  ▪ Do not allow yourself to be backed into a room with the exit blocked by the patient.
  ▪ Always have an escape path identified and remain out of direct reach of the patient.
  ▪ Remain open and non-confrontational, but recognize when they need assistance.
  ▪ Never be alone with an at-risk patient.

• By using these simple techniques, nurses can identify and manage patients with violent tendencies while protecting themselves and their colleagues from harm.

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.