

## Care of Elderly Patients: Role of Nurses

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The elderly population is growing worldwide. As the age advances, there is decline in the physical function and the person becomes susceptible to both the acute and chronic health problems. It makes them frequent user of health care services. Many patients present with multiple co-morbid conditions which may be exacerbated by the confusion and anxiety of hospitalization.

Elderly patients have age specific, complex and multifaceted needs. They are affected in unique ways by the combined effects of the ageing process, the disease process and the environment, which challenge their sense of self and influence their perception of quality of life. The elderly need nursing care which should be provided by a nurse who is knowledgeable, skilled, vigilant, sensitive, proactive, respectful and positively motivated about caring for the older persons. The main objectives of providing nursing care to the elderly are:

- To promote and maintain optimal level of health and function, detect health problems at an early stage;
- To prevent deterioration of an existing disease condition and
- To prevent further complications.

The organized framework through which the nurse delivers care involves assessing, identification of needs, planning, implementing and evaluating nursing care. While providing care to the elderly persons, nurses should be aware of the possible complications of the disease and the treatment as well. They need to assess the patient's physical, mental and cognitive skills; understand their acute and chronic health issues; and the common health concerns, such as falls, incontinence, changing sleep patterns etc.

Various functions of nurses that can contribute to the optimum health and overall wellbeing of the older people include supportive,

restorative, educative, life-enhancing and managerial.

The 'supportive' role includes psychosocial and emotional support, enhancing life styles and relationships, facilitating self expression and ensuring cultural sensitivity. The 'restorative' functions include maximizing the independence and functional ability, preventing further deterioration and/or disability, and enhancing the quality of life. This is undertaken through a focus on rehabilitation that maximizes the older person's potential for independence, including assessment skills and undertaking essential care elements for example washing, dressing etc.

Regarding the 'educative' role, the nurses should teach self care activities, for example self medication, continence promotion and health screening. By focusing on the management of chronic medical conditions the nurses can help improve the patient's quality of life. She can teach the elderly persons about the importance of weight management, indulging in some sort of physical activities, and stress management, thus reducing risks for certain diseases such as heart attack, stroke, cancer etc. In learning to manage their own health, the elderly patients can retain more independence and possibly lessen the need for medical treatment. The nurse can also assist family members, friends, and others to receive the knowledge and skills regarding elderly care including safety, disease prevention, and adherence to medication etc. The 'life enhancing' activities are aimed at enhancing the daily living experiences of older people including relieving pain and ensuring adequate nutrition. The 'managerial' role of the nurses includes the supervision of care delivered by other staff and the overall management of the home environment.

The general guidelines to care for the elderly include the followings:

- Consider individuality of the elderly patients. Don't attempt to alter the lifelong character and behavior.

- Be patient, kind, sympathetic while providing care. Handle them gently and maintain privacy while providing care.
  - Communicate effectively. Make sure they can hear you.
  - Encourage independence as far as possible.
  - Assist to achieve emotional stability. Support them during their periods of anxiety. Give them time to express their feelings. Praise even minimal achievements. Encourage contact with others.
  - Protect them from injuries, falls, and accidents with proper instructions / arrangements.
  - The elders are highly prone to develop bedsores. So, provide comfortable bed, and smooth and wrinkle free bed linen. Ensure adequate hydration and nutrition. Encourage to do active range of motion exercises. Maintain body alignment, posture, and mobility.
  - Help them to establish good sleeping pattern. Try to engage them in certain activities during day time, so that they can sleep well during night time.
  - Caution them about self use of drugs especially analgesics and narcotics. Because of the poor eyesight and forgetfulness they may not be able to understand the instructions or the importance of drug treatment. So, reinforce verbal instructions with written instructions about their drugs. Explain side effects and watch for them. Arranging drug schedule coinciding with the regular activity helps patients to remember take drugs. Otherwise we may set alarms in their mobiles or even drug reminders are also available which may be made use of. Monitor the drug dosage strength. It may be 30-50% less than the younger persons.
  - End of life care is a vital and integral part of all clinical practice. When older people are at the end of their lives, nurses can make a difference to them and their families by creating and facilitating a therapeutic environment that addresses their physical, psychological, social, cultural and spiritual needs.
- It has been estimated that elderly patients constitutes around half of the total admissions in the hospitals, but hardly there is any nursing personnel who is specifically trained in Geriatric Nursing. So, it is the need of the hour to introduce specialization in Geriatric Nursing or at least some short term course should be started in order to provide quality care to this vulnerable population.

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