

The Importance of Language: particularly when using terminology relating to health

When a diagnosis is complex or requires treatment that is unfamiliar, professionals can sometimes present information at a higher literacy level than the adult patient and/or their family can understand. Due to them not being able to digest the complex information, this can introduce confusion that may lead to serious incidents and harmful risks not being mitigated. This includes letters, forms and medical tests information as example. Not just consultation.

Steps can be taken when communicating with adult patients and / or their family assuring that the details of the condition and treatment are fully understood. This could also benefit doctor patient relationships.

Big picture:

Start with emphasising the major points, particularly if there are multiple issues, avoiding unnecessary information.

Friendly terminology:

Patients and their families should be spoken to in layman's terms. Information should be clear, in terms they would understand, and delivered slowly. This is of utmost importance if the adult has learning needs or a learning disability.

Resources:

Access to online information is convenient but can also be misleading. Proactively selecting resources and circling the relevant points or signposting to patient friendly information on the organisation's website that explains conditions or treatment can be a useful aid.

Family / carer support:

When communicating with an adult that does not understand due to their mental capacity or if there are language barriers, family or carer support could prove to be helpful in remembering important care information. It is crucial that terminology is clear and friendly to avoid confusion as it cannot be assumed that they are medically trained.

Check that they understand:

Adult patients and their families may be overwhelmed, in denial, or ashamed that they do not understand. Checking that they do understand and encouraging a safe and supportive environment where they feel empowered to ask questions is key.

