

COVID-19 Visiting Restrictions – Improving Communication with Relatives

What is already known about this topic?

- There has been some discussion about the detrimental impact of COVID-19 visiting restrictions on communication with relatives of patients in the intensive care unit (ICU).
- One letter advocated “routine telephone calls” as part of a “5-point strategy to improve connection with relatives” of patients admitted to ICU with COVID-19.
- A review summarising challenges for ICU management of COVID-19 recommended using video calls to facilitate communication between relatives and healthcare workers.

What does this article add?

- This letter is the first in the literature to recognise the detrimental impact of COVID-19 visiting restrictions on communication between healthcare workers and relatives of patients on general medical wards, rather than ICU.
- It highlights this issue to clinician readers, encouraging consideration of how it might be addressed locally.
- It is the first to demonstrate how a simple intervention of coloured stickers in the notes can improve communication with relatives.

A noticeable consequence of the Public Health England recommendations for infection prevention and control during the coronavirus disease-19 (COVID-19) pandemic has been the imposition of visiting restrictions in NHS Trusts up and down the country, 1 preventing family and friends from visiting loved ones in hospital.

Communication between healthcare professionals and the relatives of patients admitted to hospital is important. It was concerning that the introduction of visiting restrictions may decrease the quality of such communication at a time when it may be more important than ever.

On talking to 40 relatives who were unable to visit inpatients across eight medical wards at the Royal Cornwall Hospital, UK, between 30th April and 7th May 2020 due to COVID-19 visiting restrictions, relatives reported that they “worried more”, felt that they were “bothering us” by phoning, reported needing to be “pushy and persistent” to get an update over the phone and reported that updates could be “contradictory” or “vague”.

As part of an initiative to improve our communication, on 1st June 2020, we introduced brightly coloured “Communication with Next of Kin” stickers to the multidisciplinary team on the Acute Medical Unit (AMU), to be inserted into the paper medical notes as part of an entry documenting a discussion with relatives [Figure 1]. We hoped that this would allow staff to quickly review the content of previous discussions before updating relatives thus increasing continuity, highlight important discussions with relatives and raise awareness of the importance of good communication.

Feedback from 22 doctors and 11 nurses collected via an online survey from 28th June to 10th July 2020 was overwhelmingly positive with 88% finding the stickers “extremely” or “very useful”, 70%

agreeing that use of the stickers made it “easier to update” relatives and 64% agreeing that the stickers “improved the quality” of updates [Table 1].

After the stickers had been introduced for two weeks, we talked to 10 relatives of patients on the AMU who were unable to visit from 28th to 15th July 2020 and found higher mean responses to questions regarding the ease of obtaining an update, satisfaction with each update and overall satisfaction with communication, compared with six relatives of patients on the AMU spoken to from 5th to 7th May 2020 [Table 2]. Despite the small sample sizes, we were pleased to find that there was a significant difference ($p = 0.003$) between the perceived satisfaction of relatives with individual updates before and after the introduction of the stickers.

While there has been discussion about the detrimental impact of COVID-19 visiting restrictions on communication between healthcare professionals and relatives of patients admitted to the intensive care unit (ICU) 2, we wish to highlight how this issue is equally pertinent on general medical wards. This is particularly relevant as we approach the possibility of a second peak of COVID-19 cases in the coming winter 3. The use of inexpensive stickers in the patient notes was able to improve our communication with relatives during this challenging time.

References

1. Public Health England COVID-19: infection prevention and control guidance, June 2020. Available: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/893320/COVID-19_Infection_prevention_and_control_guidance_complete.pdf [Accessed 22th October 2020].
2. Azoulay and Kentish-Barnes. A 5-point strategy for improved connection with relatives of critically ill patients with COVID-19. *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine*. 2020; **8**(6): e52.
3. The Academy of Medical Sciences Preparing for a challenging winter 2020/21, July 2020. Available: <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/51353957> [Accessed 22th October 2020].

Tables

Table 1: Staff feedback for the 'Communication with Next of Kin' stickers

	Question 1 (n=33)		Question 2 (n=33)	Question 3 (n=33)
Extremely useful	12 (36%)	Strongly agree	6 (18%)	4 (12%)
Very useful	17 (52%)	Agree	17 (52%)	17 (52%)
Somewhat useful	4 (12%)	Neither agree nor disagree	9 (27%)	10 (30%)
Not so useful	0	Disagree	1 (3%)	2 (6%)
Not at all useful	0	Strongly disagree	0	0

Table 1.

The responses of 22 doctors and 11 nurses (n=33) to Questions 1, 2 and 3 (below) as part of an online survey to gather staff feedback for the 'Communication with Next of Kin' stickers.

Question 1: How useful have you found the 'Communication with Next of Kin' stickers in updating family / friends?

Question 2: The stickers have made it easier to update family / friends?

Question 3: The stickers have improved the quality of your updates to family / friends?

Table 2: Perceived satisfaction of relatives with communication before and after introducing 'Communication with Next of Kin' stickers

	Question A	Question B	Question C
Responses before introducing 'Communication with Next of Kin' stickers (n = 6)	3 ± 1	2.67 ± 0.75	3.5 ± 1.12
Responses after introducing 'Communication with Next of Kin' stickers (n = 10)	3.9 ± 0.83	4.3 ± 0.64	4.2 ± 0.60
p value	0.125	0.003	0.241

Table 2.

The responses of different relatives to Questions A, B and C (below), before and after introducing 'Communication with Next of Kin' Stickers on the Acute Medical Unit (AMU). All relatives phoned were unable to visit medical inpatients on the AMU due to COVID-19 visiting restrictions. Results

expressed as the mean average \pm standard deviation. *p* values calculated using unequal variances *t*-test (Welch's *t*-test).

Question A: When you phone how likely are you to be put through to someone who can update you about your relative? 1 -5 (1 Rarely, 2 Unlikely, 3 50:50, 4 Likely, 5 Certain).

Question B: How satisfied are with you the update you receive? 1-5 (1 Very dissatisfied, 2 Dissatisfied, 3 Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 4 Satisfied, 5 Very satisfied).

Question C: In general, how well updated / informed do you feel about the progress of your relative? 1-5 (1 Not at all well, 2 Not particularly well, 3 Reasonably, 4 Well, 5 Very well).

Figure Legends

Figure 1. 'Communication with Next of Kin' sticker to be inserted into the patient notes when documenting a discussion with relatives.