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Putting dignity at the heart of services for older people

Wales like the rest of the United Kingdom has an ageing population. The number of older people is increasing rapidly and many are living a healthier and more active life than they were even 20 years ago. Despite this improvement in the health and well-being of older people, a substantial proportion will still require NHS care either inside or out of hospital.

Older people account for the highest use of acute hospital services and the NHS spends around 40 - 45% of its expenditure on them. Maintaining a patient's dignity and treating them with respect is of paramount importance to the NHS in Wales, but anecdotal evidence has suggested that older people are sometimes not treated as respectfully as they would like while receiving NHS care.

As the Older People's Commissioner Ruth Marks said: "We are, thankfully, all living longer and healthier lives and therefore it is important to ensure that services are created which treat older people with dignity and respect."

Several surveys of inpatients across the UK have all shown that older people value healthcare services and feel that, generally, their dignity is respected. However, where care does fall short, lack of training and the resulting behaviour of staff are issues that have been raised. Observing behaviour and challenging bad practice, providing role models, good leadership and better planning of resources are all instrumental in providing better and more dignified care.

The Welsh Assembly Government's National Service Framework (NSF) for Older People in Wales provides the main policy drive for dignity in care in Wales and initiatives to improve older people's care are being driven through implementation of the NSF.

It was developed with the advice and contribution of a wide range of stakeholders, including older people, health and social care professionals and managers, academics, representatives from the voluntary and independent sectors and Assembly officials.

The NSF sets national evidence based standards for the health and social care of older people in Wales and sits firmly within the framework of the Strategy for Older People. The themes of prevention, early intervention, promoting independence and integrated services and Dignity and Nutrition cut across each of the 10 key standards.

Other initiatives such as the Dignity in Care Campaign incorporating the Dignity Challenge, all aim to promote the necessary changes in culture that are needed to ensure that older people and their carers are treated with respect, dignity and fairness when receiving NHS treatment.

Undoubtedly providing dignity in care for older people is important for both care providers and older people, and NHS organisations in Wales are always looking for ways to improve the care it gives to patients whatever their age or condition. There is within NHS Wales an identified need for more skilled staff, better training and awareness for dealing with patients with certain conditions, improved facilities and better working arrangements with contractors.

There is more work to do to ensure that older people actually receive the benefits of policies and are able to view their NHS experience as one that meets their personal needs, including dignity, rather than one that makes them more unwell both emotionally and physically.

Dignity is everybody's business. It is a joint responsibility of older people, care providers, managers, policy makers and regulators to ensure that the care received by older people in hospital is centred around the individual and maintains their dignity at all times.

Many staff do take action on a daily basis to ensure that older people are valued and respected as is their due and this must be the standard achieved in every case without exception. Robust mechanisms are vital to ensure that dignity underpins any activity while providing care, and to prevent dignity becoming a task at the bottom of the list that is never completed.

Dignity is an integral part of the delivery of care and the fundamental principle should always be 'care with dignity'.