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Blind Citizens Australia

Fact Sheet: accommodating the needs of patients who are blind or vision impaired

A stay in hospital can be a stressful time for anyone. But imagine how you might react to this situation if you were unable to see. Staff can help to ensure that patients who are blind or vision impaired have a positive experience by interacting with them in a way that is appropriate to their needs. There is no one size fits all approach, so the best thing you can do is ask the patient what you can do to make things easier for them. This fact sheet, however, will provide you with some basic strategies that will assist you in meeting the needs of patients who are blind or vision impaired.

- In the event that a patient is accompanied by a guide or seeing eye dog, the dog must be granted access under both state and federal legislation. The only areas within the hospital environment that are exempt from this rule are burns units and operating theatres.
- Care should be taken to provide the patient with a private room if there is one available, as being in an unfamiliar room with several other people can be frightening for someone who cannot visually track what is happening around them. Shared rooms may also make it more difficult for the patient to be able to navigate the hospital environment, greatly restricting their level of independence.
- To ensure that staff can act in a way that is appropriate to the needs of the patient, it is useful to have a method in place for communicating the fact that they are blind or vision impaired. Blind Citizens Australia can provide signs upon request that can be used for this purpose. Alternatively, you can print and laminate your own sign to be placed above the patient's bed. We recommend using size 72 font to allow staff to be able to read the sign from an appropriate distance. Note that you should always discuss this arrangement with the patient first and explain that it will help staff to be able to interact with them more appropriately.
- Provided that the patient is well enough, staff should always take the time to try and orientate them to their surroundings so that they feel more comfortable and can exercise greater independence in the hospital environment. Refer to Blind Citizens Australia's fact sheet on guiding a patient who is blind or vision impaired for further information.

- When approaching the patient, staff should introduce themselves by name and explain their position in the staff structure. This protocol should be followed every time the staff member comes into contact with the patient, regardless of how often this may be. It should never be assumed that the patient can recognise the person's voice and knows who is speaking to them.
- Before performing any procedure, no matter how routine it may be, staff should clearly communicate what they are about to do so the patient knows what to expect.
- When delivering food, medication, water or other items to the patient, staff should clearly communicate what they are doing and explain where the items are located. For example:

"Your tray is directly in front of you."

"Your coffee is just to the right of your tray."

"Your cutlery and napkin are just to the left of your tray."

The clock-face method can also be useful in explaining where certain things are located. If describing what is on the patient's tray for example, 12 o'clock would refer to the top of the tray, 6 o'clock would refer to the bottom of the tray, 3 o'clock to the right of the tray and 9 o'clock to the left.

- If the patient requires assistance to complete forms, staff should read all of the information included within the documents to ensure that the patient is properly informed. Staff should aim to be discreet when assisting patients with forms and take great care to ensure that the conversation takes place in private.
- Unless it is directly relevant to their care, staff should avoid asking questions about the patient's vision loss. This questioning is unnecessary and may make the patient feel uncomfortable.