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Blind Citizens Australia

Fact Sheet: guiding a patient who is blind or vision impaired

If you are orientating a patient around a hospital room or assisting them to move somewhere, you should be familiar with the proper guiding technique.

The technique that is used to guide a person who is blind or vision impaired is called “sighted guide”. The basic principles of this technique have been summarised below:

- Position yourself on the opposite side of the person to their cane or dog guide, and contact the back of their hand with your own. This will allow them to slide their hand up to your elbow.
- As you walk, the individual will usually stand around half a step behind you and slightly to the side.
- When passing through a narrow space, indicate that you are doing so and move the arm that the person is holding so that it is further behind your back. This will signal to the person that they need to move in behind you, but you may also like to verbally ask them to do this.
- When directing a person to a chair, you should give specific instructions to let them know where the chair is located and which way the chair is facing. Once you have reached the chair, place your hand on the back of it and let them know that you have done so. This will allow them to slide their hand down your arm to find the chair themselves.
- When moving through a doorway, you should always try to ensure that the person is on the hinged side of the door and explain which way the door opens.
- If approaching steps, stop at the first step and let the person know whether the stairs go up or down. You should ask them whether they would prefer to use the handrail, or for you to guide them. If using the handrail, place your hand on the rail so that they are able to find it, or give specific instructions to help them locate it themselves.

It is important to understand that not all patients will require this level of assistance. In any case, staff should approach the patient and ask whether they would like to be guided so that they can communicate their needs accordingly.