



CONDUCT COUNTS!

Communications & Sensitivity

SCENARIO

Mrs. Patel was in the palliative unit, suffering from end-stage ovarian cancer. Her extended family had been vigilant about being at her bedside and ensuring they were informed about her care. The family considered all of the options and decided that they should all be present when the time came to withdraw life support. This was communicated to Mrs. Patel's MR physician and her primary nurse.

Julia, RRT had been practising at the hospital where Mrs. Patel was a patient since she graduated 5 years ago. On the day that Mrs. Patel's life support was to be withdrawn, Julia was assigned to the unit. She was shy by nature, and dreaded having to remove ventilation because she always felt so badly for the family members; she never knew what to say to them.

When Julia was told by the primary nurse to go ahead, she stepped into Mrs. Patel's room and was surprised to see many more family members than she had ever seen visit previously. Immediately, she felt a bit intimidated so she focused on the task at hand without addressing anyone in the room. As she began to disconnect Mrs. Patel, she was startled by a shrill voice asking, "what are you doing?" Instinctively, she replied, "what does it look like I'm doing?"

Julia finished up and exited the room in a hurry. A few days later, her Manager called her into her office and informed her that the family had complained to the hospital about her "insensitive" handling of the withdrawal. According to Mrs. Patel's family, when Julia entered the room, not only did she not explain what she was about to do, she did not ask if it was okay to proceed (Julia assumed that the primary nurse had confirmed this before directing her to go ahead). As it turns out, there were still some family members who hadn't arrived, and others who had decided they didn't want to witness Mrs. Patel's passing.

RESULTS

Following an internal investigation at the hospital, the Manager submitted a mandatory report to the CRTO indicating that Julia had been suspended for 1-day as a result of the incident with Mrs. Patel's family. The CRTO then investigated, a process that involved interviewing the MR physician, primary nurse and some family members; obtaining documents from the hospital including Mrs. Patel's patient records, hospital policies and their investigation records; and reviewing the standards, guidelines and policies of the profession. After completing its investigation, a panel of the Inquiries, Complaints and Reports Committee (ICRC) required Julia to complete sensitivity training and a course on interpersonal communication.



PROFESSIONALISM

"Professionalism" or professional conduct is a term often used to describe the behaviours that are expected of individuals who hold a certain role in society. A "professional" is typically someone who has obtained skills that are recognized as requiring specific, intensive training and who applies those skills in a position impacting others (e.g., engineer, lawyer, RT, PT, MD, etc.). Professionals are often held to moral, ethical and legal standards because of this potential impact.



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EXPECTATION

It probably isn't surprising to hear that many complaints occur as a result of poor communication. Julia is like many who prefer to avoid uncomfortable situations. However, as a professional Julia has a responsibility to recognize that she may be putting her discomfort ahead of the needs of her patient or at a minimum, the patient's family. Rather than avoiding, she owes it to all involved to take steps to improve her comfort level with end-of-life procedures.

In addition to asking the primary nurse or physician if the family is ready and present, it would have been appropriate for Julia to introduce herself to the family when she entered the room, ask if they wished her to proceed, explain what she was about to do, and what they might expect to see from the patient. Not only does this re-confirm consent, it demonstrates to everyone present that you recognize the role you are playing in a very significant event for the family and, above all, professionalism.

BOTTOM LINE

Professionalism can be shown in many ways but the most effective is through appropriate communication.

RESOURCES

[Standards of Practice](#)

[Commitment to Ethical Practice](#)

