

LETTER

Therapy Area: Other

COVID-19 visiting restrictions—Improving 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 widespread visiting restrictions across NHS Trusts,^{1,2} preventing family and friends from visiting loved ones in hospital.

Communication between healthcare professionals and relatives 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 30 April and 7 May 2020 because of COVID-19 visiting restrictions, relatives reported that they “worried more,” felt that they were “bothering us” by phoning and reported needing to be “pushy and persistent” to get an update over the phone.

As part of an initiative to improve our communication, on 1 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 28 June to 10 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 2 weeks, we contacted 10 relatives of patients on the AMU who were unable to visit from 28 June to 15 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 5 to 7 May

2020 [Table 2]. Despite the small sample sizes, we were pleased to find that there was a significant difference ($P = .003$) 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 with relatives of patients admitted to the intensive care unit (ICU),³ we wish to highlight how this issue is equally pertinent on general medical and indeed surgical wards, which have had to make significant operational changes to maintain patient and staff safety during the COVID-19 pandemic internationally.^{4,5} This remains relevant given the advent of new COVID-19 strains to which the effectiveness of current vaccines remains unclear.⁶ The use of inexpensive stickers in the patient notes was able to improve our communication with relatives during this challenging time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Nil.

DISCLOSURE

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

William Jones 

Kathy Woolson

George Thomson 

The Royal Cornwall Hospital, Royal Cornwall Hospitals NHS Trust, Truro, Cornwall, UK

Correspondence

William Jones, The Royal Cornwall Hospital, Royal Cornwall Hospitals NHS Trust, Truro, Cornwall, UK.

Email: wjones8437@gmail.com

ORCID

William Jones  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7893-184X>

George Thomson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1979-4907>

MEDICAL

Admitting Consultant: _____

 OP/Ward: _____

NHS number: _____
 Name of patient: _____
 Address: _____
 Date of birth: _____
 CR number: _____

Day, Date (inc year) & Time

COMMUNICATION WITH NEXT OF KIN

FIGURE 1 “Communication with Next of Kin” sticker to be inserted into the patient notes when documenting a discussion with relatives

	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 Staff feedback for the “Communication with Next of Kin” stickers

Note: 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?

	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
<i>p</i> value	0.125	0.003	0.241

TABLE 2 Perceived satisfaction of relatives with communication before and after introducing ‘Communication with Next of Kin’ stickers

Note: 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 because of COVID-19 visiting restrictions. Results expressed as the mean average ± 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).

REFERENCES

1. Public Health England COVID-19: infection prevention and control guidance. 2020. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/893320/COVID-19_Infection_prevention_and_control_guidance_complete.pdf. Accessed October 22, 2020.
2. Royal College of Surgeons of England. Information for surgical patients during the coronavirus pandemic; 2020. <https://www.rcseng.ac.uk/coronavirus/recovery-of-surgical-services/tool-3/>. Accessed April 19, 2021.
3. Azoulay E, Kentish-Barnes NA. 5-point strategy for improved connection with relatives of critically ill patients with COVID-19. *Lancet Respir Med.* 2020;8:e52. Epub 2020 May 4. PMID: 32380024; PMCID: PMC7198186.
4. Benítez CY, Pedival AN, Talal I, et al. Adapting to an unprecedented scenario: surgery during the COVID-19 outbreak. *Rev Col Bras Cir.* 2020;47:e20202701. Portuguese, English. DOI: 10.1590/0100-6991e-20202701. Epub 2020 Aug 12. PMID: 32844915.
5. Di Saverio S, Pata F, Gallo G, et al. Coronavirus pandemic and colorectal surgery: practical advice based on the Italian experience. *Colorectal Dis.* 2020;22:625-634. Epub 2020 Jun 1 PMID: 32233064
6. Mahase E. Covid-19: where are we on vaccines and variants? *BMJ.* 2021;372:n597.