

The road to recovery

The patient's journey from
Critical Care to the general ward



An information booklet for
ward staff, patients and families.

Introduction

For many patients, the move from Critical Care to a ward environment is perceived as a positive signal that they are on the road to recovery; however for some patients and family members, this move can provoke deep anxiety.

This booklet is intended to provide information to ward staff, patients and their families in order to help them understand the psychological and physical demands of recovery from critical illness.

The information provided is general in nature and not every patient will experience all that is described. Some patients remember very little about their Critical Care stay, whilst others may have recurring memories of particular events, some of which may be false.

The Critical Care Outreach team (where these exist) and Critical Care staff will be happy to provide more information and advice.

The transfer from Critical Care *is* a positive step and so we have tried to create an upbeat note with the occasional use of some amusing cartoons, nevertheless the anxiety experienced is very real and a serious issue and something we don't take lightly.

This booklet has been produced as part of Critical Cares' commitment towards improving communication to others, to help understand the service and in particular the impact of critical illness on patients and their families.

Thanks are extended to healthcare professionals from across Lancashire & South Cumbria Critical Care Network in contributing towards the contents of this booklet.

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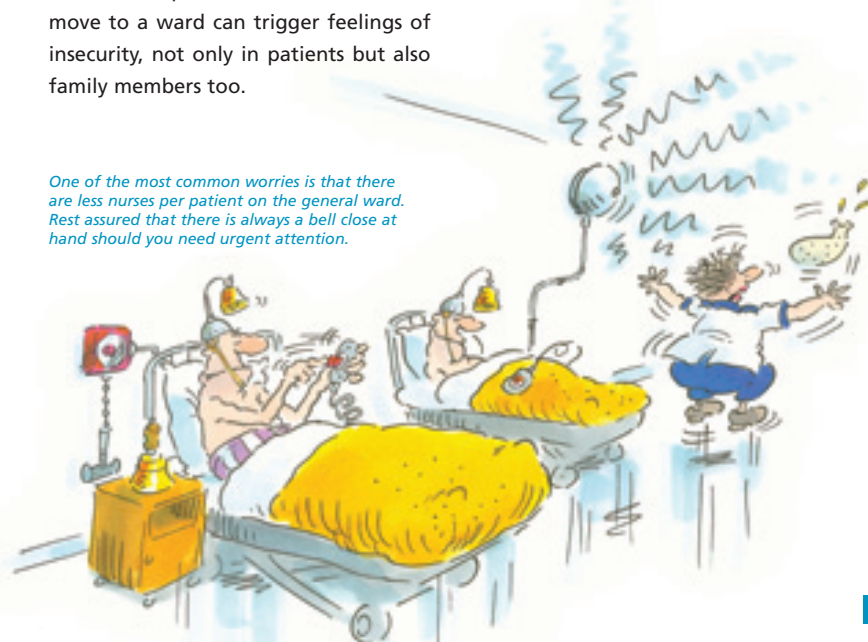
Relocation Anxiety

Some recovering critically ill patients and their families develop 'relocation anxiety'. For over a decade now this has been recognised as a specific psychological crisis that occurs when a patient is moved from a Critical Care area to a general ward environment.

Patients and families have often formed deep attachments to Critical Care staff; having felt reassured by the numbers of staff available there and by the monitoring equipment that is used to observe patients. As a result the move to a ward can trigger feelings of insecurity, not only in patients but also family members too.

For this reason it is important that patients and families are well prepared for transfer by Critical Care staff and that ward staff welcome the patient to their ward. Patients and their families need to be reassured that Critical Care services are no longer needed; they have overcome the severe phase of their illness and are now on the road to recovery. Being aware for other common problems may help ward staff and families support patients through this difficult time.

One of the most common worries is that there are less nurses per patient on the general ward. Rest assured that there is always a bell close at hand should you need urgent attention.



Psychological Impact

Some patients may have been so ill they required a period of time on 'life support'. It is almost impossible for anyone who has not been a patient on life support to imagine what it is like.

For a period of time there may be a total loss of independence, resulting in total disruption of sleep patterns, unpleasant sensory and psychological feelings induced by the critical illness itself and also by the powerful range of medications which are required to treat the patient. With the inability to communicate how they are feeling throughout much of this time, it is understandable what stresses they are experiencing.

Those patients who have memories of their time in Critical Care, sometimes struggle to separate the reality of their stay from the nightmares and hallucinations which some experience.

Letting patients know that bad dreams and inaccurate memories are common and encouraging them to talk, can often help them to re-order their thoughts and separate fact from fiction.

Often Critical Care Outreach teams and Clinical Psychologists can help explain to patients what and why they feel the way they do.

Some patients may suffer from the psychological effects of a critical illness and a change in mood is not unusual. Some may find their mood is low or depressed; anxiety and panic attacks are also common as a result of the traumatic experience they have been through. Sudden or unaccountable changes in mood should be shared ►



You will gradually get some independence back along with the ability to self care.



You will notice your appetite slowly getting back to normal.



As activity increases (muscle) weakness and joint stiffness will improve.

with nursing/medical staff so that these can be monitored, as these symptoms can be due to a post – traumatic stress response that may require treatment.

Patients may worry that they may never fully recover the health they had before critical illness and may feel that recovery is taking too long. It is important that patients are given reassurance and encouragement

through this difficult time. Where necessary if altered mood (depression) is persistent, or is interfering with the patient's motivation to participate in rehabilitation, it may be appropriate for a referral to be made for psychological assessment, treatment and support.

Other feelings that may be experienced:

- Helplessness
- Fear
- Anger
- Resentment
- Guilt and shame

Be Assured

Although to some it may not feel like it, leaving Critical Care should be a time for celebration. The patient is getting better and is now well enough to need a less intensive level of care, and remember no patient is ever transferred unless they are ready.

You may have to be patient, progress can be slow, but there are positive signs to look out for that show the patient is on the road to recovery.

With all of these can come a gradual renewal of self esteem, confidence and spirit.

Physical Impact

There are a number of physical problems, which are common to many patients who have been in Critical Care for more than a few days.

These are:

- Headaches, back or neck pain caused by muscle tension
- Dizziness
- Widespread muscle wastage
- Stiff joints
- Shaking or tremors
- Loss of taste and nausea leading to a lack of appetite
- Difficulty coughing and swallowing
- Extreme tiredness or fatigue

This range of problems mean that when patients are discharged back to general ward they may still require a high degree of nursing intervention and support to meet their basic needs, such as washing, dressing and feeding themselves. Whilst patients struggle to regain some degree of 'normality' it is important ward staff and family members show patience and give reassurance.



Whilst getting activity back is a great step towards independence, it is important that neither the nursing staff nor the patient attempt too much too soon.

Encouraging Recovery

Recovery from critical illness can be a long process for some. Studies have shown that muscle mass may take up to 12 months to be regained.

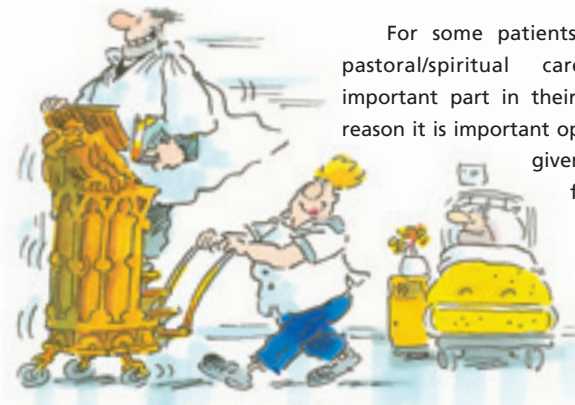
Where possible encourage the patient to participate in self care activities. In the short-term it can seem quicker and easier to do something for the patient rather than to support them while they do it for themselves. However, patiently encouraging the patient to participate in their own care can help to rebuild confidence and independence. It is important to get the balance right as the patient may quickly become tired.

Help the patient to come to terms with what has happened by talking to them about their experiences and feelings.

The body lays down fat deposits more easily than it builds muscle. Encourage the patient to eat a healthy diet. It may be necessary for the patient to eat little and often, if their appetite is poor. Support from a Dietician may help patients regain appetites and normal eating patterns.

It is not uncommon for the wider healthcare team to give treatment in ward areas, this may include physiotherapy, speech and language and occupational health services. All these play a part in ensuring the return to well being is as full as it can be.

For some patients and families, pastoral/spiritual care plays an important part in their lives. For this reason it is important opportunities are given to receive this form of support from available resources.



Further Information

We hope you have found this booklet useful in understanding the journey patients make following recovery from critical illness. Please feel free to approach members of the healthcare team if you wish any further information, or to discuss any concerns you have regarding your own or a loved-ones recovery. If you have any comments regarding the content of this booklet please contact us at the following address:

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