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University enhances the health of communication in hospitals

Northumbria University is delivering master classes to equip health care professionals with the skills and confidence needed when dealing with difficult clinical conversations.

North East hospital trusts and hospices approached Northumbria University for a solution that would build on the communication skills of their clinicians and nurses who need to hold difficult conversations with patients, carers and staff. The delivery of life-changing news is a situation which requires the utmost sensitivity throughout the health care profession.

Gillian Walton, Director of Programmes in Northumbria's Department of Public Health and Wellbeing, developed a communications master class for clinicians from different disciplines including nurses, radiographers, and physiotherapists in response to the hospitals' requests. Using actors to play the role of patients, health care professionals are able to develop and test the best ways to prepare for, and respond to, situations they may face when dealing with patients. More than 200 health care professionals have now benefitted from the course.

Gillian leads the Managing Difficult Situations module in Northumbria's Continuing Professional Development (CPD) framework and has been trained as a recognised National Advanced Communication Facilitator by the Department of Health. She said: "Having effective communication skills is important for every health care professional. Sensitive news delivered poorly can become a negative experience that lingers in the minds of patients, families and clinicians.

"These classes look at core communication skills which are simulated by actors as patients then students can role play in a safe facilitative environment. I use directed reflection and debriefing, which improves students' self-awareness and confidence in handling difficult conversations. The classes evaluated extremely well with 100% of participants from the NHS Trust saying they would recommend the day to other colleagues."

Sharron Surrey, Ward Sister at Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Gateshead, completed the course two years ago and has been a qualified nurse for nine years. She said: "The communications master class has helped me considerably. No-one likes to do role play, but it really enabled me to think about the reason behind someone's behaviour.

"When someone is aggressive towards you, whether it's because they are worried about a loved one, waiting for treatment or upset about news you have just told them, it's hard not to feel defensive. The master class helped me learn to 'step outside the situation' and de-personalise matters which are emotionally charged and can easily be mistaken as personal."

Susan Blackburn, Head of Education and Development at Gateshead NHS Foundation Trust, said: "It's fantastic that we have now been able to offer this to a range of clinicians across different disciplines."

Dietician Aileen Spain has also completed the course. She added: “The role-play training was very powerful and it was useful to work with other healthcare professionals and consider the range of scenarios others face. I now use the skills I took away from the course when I’m managing staff. Effective communication within your team is just as important as our conversations with patients – it’s such an important part of healthcare.”

For more information on Northumbria’s CPD programmes for health care professionals visit www.northumbria.ac.uk/cpd

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