

Rather than testing patients on what day it is today, why not also think about deploying a visual cue?

BACKGROUND

A former rehab patient, well known for being unafraid to deliver snap but charming responses, was politely asked by the doctor during a routine morning ward round to tell today's day and date for a quick assessment of her mental alert status. She stunned the doctor with this reply: "How do you expect me to tell you when I have not seen a calendar since I was hospitalised here and have already lost all track of day and month." That attention-grabbing reply not only authenticated her alertness, it pointed to a failure to understand that it is not about how patients like her could be quickly assessed in this way for their mental alertness, but how so few visual cues there are in the wards to make those sorts of assessments valid. The concerned nurses who were with the doctor in this ward round then decided that this failure should be investigated as a QI project.

PROJECT AIM

1. To develop and deploy a suitable visual cue to test mental awareness of day and date.

ANALYSIS

When elderly patients arrive in Bright Vision Hospital (BVH), it is essential to make an initial assessment of their mental status because cognitive impairment is common in the elderly. One important aspect of this assessment is the ability to function in the everyday world related to psychological orientation.

In BVH, this is done by asking a series of questions and, more often than not, when it comes to the question of telling day and date, many elderly patients tend to lose track of it due to their confused mental state. Orientation of time, date and day plays a critical part for us to function normally everyday, but it can be tricky for many elderly people, who will require reinforcement with background information, visual and memory cues to stimulate their attentiveness, orientation and self-awareness.

SOLUTIONS

The first visual cue provided in the wards had been in the form of the commercially available wall-mounted calendar shown below. The calendar has both English and Chinese renderings of month and day and can be easily updated simply by tearing off the old date to show the new one.



But, because these calendars were deployed in the corridors outside the wards, they are not accessible by bed-bound patients. And not even the largest of these calendars placed inside the ward areas will be visibly large enough to be read by all patients from their beds. This is clearly not useful, and it is especially not helpful for bed-bound patients looking for a calendar to refer to.

After a few failed attempts to find a suitable commercially available calendar, the team decided to build one from scratch. More importantly, the team feel strongly that it's a worthwhile project because everyone wants it. Elderly patients need it when asked to respond to questions about day and date. Clinical staff want it so that their favourite abbreviated mental test will be measuring mental alertness and not the absence of visual cues. And management wants it because getting patients to be oriented to day and date contributes positively to their mental and emotional well-being.

The team listed the following criteria they would like to see in their bespoke calendar:

- It can be wall-mounted.
- The font size is large enough to be visible for every patient in the ward.
- Month and day are displayed in both English and Chinese.
- It can be conveniently updated by ward staff.

SOLUTIONS

Figure 1 below shows the version that has gone into display in the wards. It is designed as a calendar board with month and day labels in both English and Chinese. The size is 40cm by 30cm and constructed with laminated paper with interchangeable dates and months slotted inside the slide-in pockets.

Figure 1



Initially, only one calendar was mounted on a wall adjacent to the entrance into each ward. The font size was big enough to be seen by patients from beds situated near the entrance, but is not visible for those on the further end opposite the entrance. To cater to these patients, another calendar board has been put up in every ward. Every night, a staff would be assigned to update the calendar boards, and every morning, another staff would check to ensure that the correct dates are showing.

Calendar boards at opposite ends of the ward



PROJECT'S IMPACT

Both staff and patients have applauded this idea of a calendar board that is so conspicuous and large enough for everyone in the ward to see. "You simply can't miss it once you enter the ward," said one of the staff nurses.

According to staff and family members, our elderly patients have shown palpably more self-awareness, improved orientation and real-word connectivity since the introduction of the calendar boards. Some patients are using the calendars to look forward to the events and activities that have been scheduled for them, and almost no patient now ask about the day.

The upsides of the calendar board come with two major downsides. Its stability and durability are in question. Since it is made of laminated paper and merely pasted on the wall with sticky tapes, it won't take long before it falls off. The second downside - and this shouldn't surprise anyone - staff may overlook updating the calendar, which can be annoying to patients and their family members.

SUSTAINABILITY AND SPREAD

The idea is sustainable, not just because everyone wants it, but because the idea is not costly at all to implement. And, there is scope for further improvement with the current calendar board. For example, it can be improved with more research into using a board that is made with sturdier, longer-lasting materials. And sure, spread the idea around.