

Good practice for handling feedback



RCN guidance on handling and learning from comments, concerns and complaints





About this guide

This guide has been prepared by the RCN to help frontline nurses and health care support workers understand how to deal with feedback, both good and bad, as well as concerns, complaints and compliments. It's one of two commitments that we made following the 2013 Clwyd-Hart review report on the English NHS hospital complaints system.

RCN members have been instrumental in the development of this guide, and its production has involved detailed discussion and consultation with members about their own experiences when trying to deliver the best care possible across a wide variety of services delivering health and social care in the UK.

This guide is not meant to be exhaustive and we appreciate that each workplace will be different. However, we hope you'll find it provides simple and straightforward advice that will help you in your day-to-day work.

Feedback, concerns and complaints – learn from the bad and celebrate the good

It's never easy to hear people say challenging things about the way we do our jobs. For the nursing profession, where the focus is on getting it right for all of our patients, all of the time, it's doubly hard.

Being a professional, however, means being willing and able to hear the hard detail as well as the positive detail. It means being able to take feedback, good or bad, to improve the way you and your team works. The aim of the game is to ensure that the care you provide really does meet the needs of your patients, and their families and loved ones.

Handling complaints and feedback

– the vital facts

- It's hard for most people to complain, and it's even harder when they are in a situation of vulnerability, such as being in a hospital or a clinic.
- Most complaints start off as simple matters; but it's the way that complaints are handled that can potentially turn them into complicated and time-consuming problems.
- Most people raising a concern or making a complaint want a simple and quick resolution to a problem.
- Many concerns and complaints are about things that have the potential to affect others. Resolving these issues is a way to learn and prevent the same thing from happening again.

Being responsive

- The way you respond to someone will set the tone for how the rest of the conversation and any subsequent processes go.
 - Being open, honest, and friendly is much more likely to result in a positive experience for everyone, irrespective of whether you are actually able to resolve anything.
- It's perfectly OK to apologise to someone if you feel that they have a valid complaint.
 - Offering an apology does not constitute an acceptance of responsibility. In many cases an apology will help you to manage the immediate problem of someone wanting to share their bad experience with someone who cares, so that hopefully you can ensure that it doesn't reoccur.

Moving things on

- If you can't resolve a problem or complaint quickly, including by escalating it to someone more senior, you should ensure that the person raising the concern is given all the information that they need to make a formal complaint.
 - Make sure that they take your name and contact details, identifying you as being the first person that they spoke to about the matter.
 - Make a record for yourself of what happened and what you said or did, so that you can refer back to it if needed at some later date.
 - In some circumstances, for instance if the concern relates directly to clinical care, it may also be necessary to write directly in a patient's notes that a concern or complaint has been made.



Difficult situations

Some situations, and some people, are more challenging than others. People who are distressed, angry, or exhibiting the effects of alcohol or drugs can also be particularly difficult to manage.

However, there are some simple steps that you can take that will help you to help them, and ensure that you or your colleagues are not put into tricky or threatening situations:

- ensure that you follow any local policies and procedures for such situations, and consider whether you might need to ask for non-clinical support
- always start any conversation by telling people your name, and asking for theirs
- try to keep your voice and manner level and calm. People find it hard to continue being aggressive with someone who is calm
- try to find a quiet place, preferably with seating. It's very hard for people to maintain an angry stance when seated and a quiet space can help to emphasise, and thus calm, someone's overly loud voice
- always let colleagues know if you are taking someone to a separate room or space, and make sure they know where you are and keep a check on you. You may want to consider taking a colleague with you. But if you're unsure or uncertain about the person's mood or state of mind, stay in a more public space
- if you feel that your efforts are not helping to calm the situation, and the person continues to exhibit challenging or threatening behaviour, tell them that you cannot do anything further until they stop. If necessary, ask colleagues to come to help you
- in potentially serious or dangerous circumstances, for instance if the situation involves a number of people, think through what might happen. If you are unsure about how you might deal with every eventuality, consider doing a formal risk assessment.

Know your responsibilities and rights

- Always remember that your first duty, as laid out in your code of conduct, is to those in your care; even if that means having to report your mistakes – or those made by others.
- Wherever you're working, you have a right to be informed of the processes for managing feedback and complaints that are in place.
- If you see something happening in your workplace that you feel is poor practice or unsafe, you have an obligation to raise or report your concerns. If this is difficult, you have the right to inform a senior member of staff and to expect that they will act upon your concern.
- Don't try to do things, or promise things, that you are untrained or unqualified to do. It is safer to tell someone that you cannot help them directly but that you will get someone who can, than to risk causing dissatisfaction or, even worse, harm.
- Make sure you access any available training on complaints handling and, if relevant, conflict resolution. If training isn't available, ask your management about providing it.
- You should be made aware of the appropriate senior colleague to whom you can re-direct any complaints. Ideally, you should be able to take someone with a concern directly to them in the event that you are unable to resolve a problem.

Raising and responding to concerns is something that staff should all be comfortably able to do. But we know that being able to speak out is not always as easy as it sounds. The RCN has produced a range of resources to help staff feel able to raise concerns in their workplace. More information is available at: www.rcn.org.uk/raisingconcerns

Learning from feedback

There's a sizeable amount of evidence relating to value and benefits of reflective practice – in other words, reviewing your actions or something that's happened to see how bad practice could be prevented in the future and how good practice could be turned into everyday practice.

Use your regular team review sessions to look at any feedback that you and your team have received; both positive and negative. Think about where you could improve, or where you might need further training or increased resources. It's also important to look at where you did well and see what it took for those experiences to happen, so that you can build on this success.

There are lots of ways to generate feedback. If you work on a ward or in a fixed service setting, have a comments book available for patients, carers and visitors to write about their experiences of the service. At an individual level, consider using a 'reflective diary' which can be considered at the team review session or staff meetings. Further information on reflective practice can be found on the RCN Learning Zone at www.rcn.org.uk/learningzone

Your organisation may also generate information from patient surveys or online questionnaires, all of which can be used to build a picture of what your patients – and their relatives and carers – think about the care that you provide.



What the RCN can do for you

The RCN is committed to ensuring that its members, and the wider nursing workforce, are adequately resourced, trained and supported to deliver the best care possible.

We strive to ensure that every workplace has an RCN presence, and through our representatives we can help you to provide the care you want to.

Our workplace reps can also help and support you in challenging poor workforce planning decisions that may lead to patient concerns or complaints.

And of course, as an RCN member you can choose to help your colleagues by becoming an RCN rep in your own workplace.

If things do escalate and you find yourself involved in a complaints process or an investigation, you can call RCN Direct on 0345 772 6100, seven days a week or you can email them at any time at membership@rcn.org.uk or web.enquiries@rcn.org.uk (members should include their name and membership number).



Across the UK

Although the key principles that underpin good feedback and complaints management are the same wherever you work in the UK, there are some procedural and legal differences in each of the devolved countries.

England

The NHS Complaints (England) Regulations 2009 provide a high-level legal framework for complaints handling by NHS organisations in England. However in practice the processes for handling complaints do differ across the NHS, and individual trusts and health care providers will have their own arrangements and practices.

The NHS Constitution and its accompanying handbook lay out the broad principles and accompanying rights in relation to the general handling of complaints across the NHS in England. This includes confirmation that people making a complaint have the right to:

- have their complaint dealt with efficiently, and be properly investigated
- know the outcome of any investigation into their complaint
- take their complaint to the independent parliamentary and health service ombudsman if they are dissatisfied with the way the NHS has dealt with their complaint
- make a claim for judicial review if they think that they have been directly affected by an unlawful act or decision of an NHS body
- receive compensation if they have been harmed.

Northern Ireland

The Complaints in health and social care: standards and guidelines for resolution and learning provides a streamlined process that applies equally to all health and social care (HSC) organisations. These standards and guidelines provide a simple, consistent approach for staff who handle complaints and for people raising complaints across all health and social care services.

Scotland

In Scotland there is specific legislation, and accompanying guidance, in relation to patient rights and feedback, and complaints handling and management. This places some specific requirements on Scotland's NHS boards in relation to how frontline staff receive and handle feedback and complaints:

- boards must ensure that staff receive relevant training and guidance on handling feedback, comments, concerns and complaints
- staff must be aware of, and be able to direct patients or those raising feedback, comments, concerns or complaints to advice and support; this includes contact details of the feedback and complaints officer and details of the patient advice and support service
- staff handling feedback, comments, concerns or complaints should treat the person raising them in a courteous and sympathetic manner.

Further resources relating to patient rights include:

[Patients Rights \(Scotland\) Act 2011](#)

[The Patient Rights \(feedback, comments, concerns and complaints\) \(Scotland\) Directions 2012](#)

[The Patient Rights \(complaints procedure and consequential provisions\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2012](#)

Wales

The *Putting things right* guidance has been produced for the NHS in Wales to enable responsible bodies to effectively handle concerns according to the requirements set out in the National Health Service (Concerns, Complaints and Redress Arrangements) (Wales) Regulations (2011).

The underpinning legislation can be found here: www.wales.nhs.uk



Further resources

Raising concerns – NMC guidance for nursing and midwifery staff.

Saying sorry – an NHS Litigation Authority leaflet about the practicalities and legalities of giving an apology.

Can I help you? – guidance produced by NHS Scotland and Scottish Government on good practice in handling and learning from feedback, comments, concerns, or complaints about NHS health care services.

Hello my name is – a campaign that's dedicated to getting every health care worker to start every conversation with a patient with this phrase.

The Patients Association Speaking up project – a project led by the Patients Association to help improve the way complaints are handled in the NHS in England.

SBAR – a nationally recognised tool to improve communication between all members of staff.

Facilitated patient experience feedback can improve nursing care – a report of a pilot study for a phase III cluster randomised controlled trial.

Brief encounters – an online resource with advice and information on how to support people in hospital who are experiencing stress or trauma.





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