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Putting shared decision-making into practice: top tips for health professionals

It's when patients and health professionals work together to decide between different treatments. Patients are experts in their own lives and what matters to them. Health professionals are experts in the medical side of things. By pulling together this expertise, a joint decision is made about which treatment could work best for the patient.

Why does shared decision-making matter?

It matters for lots of reasons. As registered health professionals we sign up to standards that shape the way we care for people.

Shared decision-making is a way of communicating with patients and carers. It is a process we do that demonstrates person-centred care.

Shared decision making is especially important when there is no clear answer about which treatment might work best.

In these instances, choosing between treatments really depends upon the patients' preferences. By building a shared understanding we can help patients to make a decision that is right for them.

That way we make decisions with patients, not for them and the care is usually better and patients are happier.

So do we really do shared decision-making?

Shared decision-making isn't new. But how do we know we are really doing it? Sometimes we focus mainly on information giving. But we know that decision support is much more than that. So let's recap on the key steps. And you might want to think about how each step happens in your own service.

Step 1. Conversations about choices.

In this step, we set the scene for a shared decision-making conversation. We explain that there is a choice to be made between treatments. We make it clear that patients' views count. We ask about how much information the patient would like, so we know what works best for them. We explain that they will not be left to make a decision alone and that we will decide together.

Step 2. Comparing the options.

In this step, we provide evidence-based information to help patients compare their treatment options. This includes detail about risks, benefits and what would happen if they decided against having any treatment.

Sending out a patient decision aid before an appointment is a good way to make the most of the conversation. It helps patients to understand and compare their treatment options in advance.

Patients often find the medical jargon difficult to understand. So, to make sure we have clearly explained things, we can ask the patient to describe their treatment options back to us, in their own words. That way we can sort out any misunderstanding.

Step 3. Deciding together.

In this step, we help patients to decide on a treatment option that can work best for them. We ask about which treatment they favour and why. We make space for them to share any worries, concerns and ask questions. We work towards making a decision together. Although some patients may need more time to decide. We end by explaining what will happen next in their plan of care.

So, in summary. Shared decision-making is a two-way discussion that happens when patients and health care teams have

1. Conversations about choices.

2. Compare the options.

3. Decide together

This aim is to jointly agree on a treatment option that reflects best evidence and matches the patient preferences.

Follow the link for more information.