“All young people with cancer should receive specialist care”

From my experience, teenagers and young adults (TYA) tend to cope with the experience of cancer differently from adults or children. They are in a rapid phase of development, changing not only physically, but also developing in cognitive, psychological and social behaviours. Cancer comes at a challenging time for young people and may be their first difficult life experience. Treatment at this age can have a significant psychosocial and physical impact on wellbeing.

Cancer treatment disrupts school life, career and educational plans, as well as relationships and social networks. Adjusting back to “normal” can be as difficult as the treatment itself, so care needs to stretch beyond the direct treatment focus.

To provide holistic care, nurses need to be highly knowledgeable about this patient group. When delivered effectively, TYA cancer care allows young people to mature through their illness, developing coping strategies and a sense of self.

Young people receive treatment in a variety of settings and it is up to us to take TYA cancer care to them. It is over 25 years since the first Teenage Cancer Trust unit opened in London. This landmark moment set in motion the development of cancer units in NHS hospitals across the UK and, with it, the funding of specialist staff by the charity. This has allowed age-appropriate services to grow and evolve.

Nurses working with young cancer patients inspired a shift in attitudes, approach and philosophy of care. They shared their professional knowledge of young people’s specific needs and issues, and used their first-hand experiences to drive change. They challenged the culture and won over hearts and minds. As a result, TYA cancer care is now recognised as a specialty in its own right.

The trust is currently rolling out its Nursing and Support Service, for which it won the Nursing Times HRH Prince of Wales Award for Integrated Approach to Healthcare. The model ensures specialist nursing care reaches all young people with cancer. It provides independent specialist TCT nurses, working with and alongside disease-specific teams across all hospitals.

Nurses are alerted from the point of diagnosis so they can support young people and their families, and provide age-specific expertise and advice to the treating teams.

To maintain and inspire this specialist workforce, professionals from across the UK and the rest of the world need to share their practice, experiences and research.

Sam Smith is the head of nursing and clinical services for Teenage Cancer Trust.

To book your place on the Global Adolescent and Young Adult Cancer Congress, visit www.teenagecancertrust.org/conference

Nurses need to reflect on their patient conduct

Few people would list being in hospital admission as a nice way to spend time. Besides the fact that most hospital patients will be feeling unwell, they are also in unfamiliar surroundings, away from friends, family and their usual routines. So it’s little wonder that some patients feel vulnerable and helpless.

This means hospital patients can be far more sensitive if they feel the care they receive lacks compassion or empathy. And the situation is exacerbated for those with reduced functioning or cognitive problems that make it difficult for them to understand their situation.

Our series on patient narratives continues with a discussion of empathy (p22); it encourages you to reflect on how you behave towards particularly vulnerable patients, and whether you could do anything to make their time in your care easier.

Ann Shuttleworth is practice and learning editor of Nursing Times.

www.nursingtimes.net / Vol 112 No 15 / Nursing Times 13.04.16 11