



Review

Interventions to improve communication between people with dementia and nursing staff during daily nursing care: A systematic review



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ABSTRACT

Background: To provide adequate nursing care it is important for nursing staff to communicate effectively with people with dementia. Due to their limited communication skills, people with dementia have difficulties in understanding communication and expressing themselves verbally. Nursing staff members often report communication difficulties with people with dementia, which emphasises the urgent need for interventions to improve their communication with people in this specific target group.

Objectives: To provide an up-to-date overview of communication interventions that are applicable during daily nursing care activities, irrespective of care setting, and to describe the effects on communication outcomes in people with dementia and nursing staff.

Design: Systematic literature review

Data sources: The Cochrane Library, CINAHL, PsycINFO, and Pubmed databases were searched for all articles published until the 23rd of February 2016.

Review methods: Papers were included, if: (1) interventions focused on communication between nursing staff and people with dementia and were applicable during daily nursing care; (2) studies were (randomised) controlled trials; (3) papers were written in English, Dutch, or German. Data were extracted on content and communication outcomes of interventions, and on methodological quality of the studies. The data extraction form and methodological quality checklist were based on the Method Guidelines for Systematic Reviews for the Cochrane Back Review Group.

Results: Six studies on communication interventions were included. All of the studies incorporated a communication skills training for nursing staff with a broad range in frequency, duration and content. In addition, there was wide variation in the communication outcome measures used. Four studies measured non-verbal communication, all found positive effects on at least some of the communication outcomes. Four studies measured verbal communication, of which three found positive effects on at least one of the measured outcomes. Methodological quality assessment demonstrated a high risk of bias in five of the six studies.

Conclusions: Few studies have been identified with wide variation in interventions and outcome measures. In addition, the methodological shortcomings make it difficult, to draw conclusions about the effectiveness. More research is needed to develop and evaluate communication interventions. Additionally, it is useful to reach consensus on defining and measuring communication.

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What is already known about the topic?

- Communication between people with dementia and nursing staff is important in daily nursing care to provide adequate care.
- Communication with people with dementia may be challenging due to their limited communication skills. Earlier literature

reviews aimed to identify communication interventions, however, did not focus solely on interventions which are applicable during daily nursing care.

What this paper adds

- Few communication interventions were identified that are applicable during daily nursing care. All identified interventions incorporated a communication skills training component.

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- Existing interventions show much variation in (1) frequency, duration and content, and (2) outcome measures and reported results. In addition, the identified studies showed methodological shortcomings.

1. Introduction

Communication together with care for breathing, eating and drinking, elimination, cleanliness and dressing, mobility, activities, rest, sleep, body temperature, expressing sexuality, care for safety (prevention of complications) and palliative care, belongs to basic nursing care activities, also known as the ‘fundamentals of care’ (Kitson et al., 2010). Basic nursing care serves nearly all people in their lifetimes and is generic across medical conditions and care settings (Feo and Kitson, 2016; Kitson et al., 2010). Despite its broad application, it is poorly informed by evidence, although this evidence is essential to improve patient functioning, comfort and safety in large populations and in various settings (Zwakhalen et al., under review). The current systematic review focuses on generating evidence to embark upon new research for future intervention studies in communication in daily nursing care with a focus on communication with people with dementia.

Communication with people with dementia can be challenging because of their cognitive impairments (Blair et al., 2007) and decline in verbal communication skills (Ripich, 1994). Communication is defined as an interaction between two (or more) parties, who are reversibly either the sender or receiver of information (Kourkouta and Papathanasiou, 2014). It consists of verbal aspects such as tone and speech, but also of non-verbal aspects like body language and touch (Powell, 2000). In people with dementia both the sending as well as receiving aspect of communication are affected (Ripich, 1994). Communication difficulties may vary among individuals, however, they are most often reflected in an individual's choice of correct words and building complex sentences, difficulties in understanding verbal information, and remembering what has been recently said (Haberstroh et al., 2011; Mendez et al., 2003). However, they are often still able to send and receive non-verbal information or short and easy sentences. In addition, they can talk about things that happened a long time ago (Haberstroh et al., 2011). Furthermore, people with dementia might misinterpret aspects of symbolic information such as metaphors, humorous statements (Fromm and Holland, 1989) and literal statements (Richter et al., 1995; Rousseaux et al., 2010). Because problems mostly occur verbally, people with dementia often express themselves in a non-verbal behavioural way, and understand non-verbal information better as well (Blair et al., 2007; Haberstroh et al., 2011; Savundranayagam et al., 2005). Aggressive and agitated behaviour in people with dementia can also be an attempt to communicate (Blair et al., 2007).

Research shows that nursing staff often lack the skills and knowledge needed to communicate properly (Stans et al., 2013). Understanding the non-verbal behavioural communication and impaired verbal expression of people with dementia can be problematic for nursing staff (Brodady et al., 2003; Savundranayagam et al., 2005; Small et al., 2000; Wang et al., 2013). In addition, communication is often a low priority because of the workload they experience, and the nursing staff's lack of awareness concerning the importance of communication (Burton, 2008; Stans et al., 2013). This results in short interactions which are mostly task-oriented and mainly occur during nursing care activities (Beerens et al., 2016; Ekman et al., 1991; Grainger, 2004; Ice, 2002; Williams et al., 2009; Wood et al., 2005).

Communication difficulties may have troublesome effects on the quality of daily nursing care (Yorkston et al., 2010) as communication is essential to understand patients' preferences

and feelings and to establish their care needs (Candlin and Candlin, 2003; Yorkston et al., 2010). When nursing staff experience difficulties in communicating with people with dementia, a reduction in the interaction rate can be observed (Hairon, 2008). One reason might be that communication difficulties have been shown to increase the stress and burnout levels of nursing staff (Savundranayagam et al., 2005). Stressed nursing staff and the unmet needs of people with dementia in turn may cause an even greater increase in the aggressive and agitated behaviour of people with dementia (Downs and Collins, 2015).

Previous research has shown that dementia education is inadequately preparing nursing staff for daily dementia care (Pulsford et al., 2007; Tsolaki et al., 2010) and for communicating with people with dementia (Beer et al., 2012; Downs et al., 2009). Consequently, more support is suggested to deal with this problem (Hughes et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2013; Page and Hope, 2013). In the past, several systematic reviews have evaluated communication interventions. While Eggenberger et al. (2013) evaluate communication skills training for professional and non-professional caregivers in any care setting, the systematic review of Vasse et al. (2010) has a broader scope of interventions and also includes set-time interventions such as walking and talking interventions, cognitive stimulation therapies or activity therapies, though it is not specifically aimed at improving the communication between people with dementia and nursing staff. Another review by McGilton et al. (2009) focuses on communication interventions in residential care settings. However, the interventions are not specifically designed for people with dementia and nursing staff, but for residents and healthcare providers in general. Thus the interventions included are not necessarily applicable during daily nursing care for people with dementia.

To date, no systematic review exists that focuses specifically on communication interventions which are applicable during daily nursing care. ‘Applicable during daily nursing care’ means that the communication interventions can be applied during regular care moments (e.g. washing or dressing). Therefore, interventions that need extra time such as group therapies or walking-and-talking interventions (also known as set-time interventions) were excluded. Moreover, interventions aimed at improving communication during daily nursing care activities have been shown to be more effective than set-time interventions (Vasse et al., 2010) and may save time and money, which is highly relevant considering the strain on health care caused by ageing societies (Fujisawa and Colombo, 2009). This systematic review will provide an up-to-date description of communication interventions which are applicable during daily nursing care, irrespective of the care setting. Furthermore, it will provide a description of the effects on communication outcomes.

2. Methods

A systematic literature review was performed based on the principles of the Cochrane Handbook for reviews (Higgins and Green, 2011). This type of design is used to provide a description of the content and effects of existing communication interventions which are empirically tested.

2.1. Search strategy

On 23rd February 2016, the Cochrane, CINAHL, PsycINFO, and Pubmed databases were accessed for intervention studies with any date of publication. The databases were accessed by either title or title and abstract. No limitations in the search time frame were used. Search terms included those related to dementia, communication, and intervention studies: (*‘dementia’ OR ‘lewy body’ OR ‘lewy*

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