Shared communication

In the paediatric ward, we place patients and their family at the very heart of our healthcare delivery. We understand that parents and guardians remain the most knowledgeable and committed advocates for their children.

We include you in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of your child’s health care during their stay in the paediatric ward. This is done using various tools such as the bedside communication whiteboard, where you and the multidisciplinary health care team can visually display non-confidential information in relation to your child’s care needs and goals.

In addition, our care planning document is used in collaboration with you, your child and health care staff to identify clinical issues, outline your child’s specific needs for the day and identify tasks that could benefit your child’s recovery.

Sensory toolboxes

We offer sensory toolboxes which contain a range of interesting sensory items that help to distract anxious children, particularly those with ASD. The boxes can also be used by healthcare professionals to guide children through procedures, using a variety of items that cater to a range of common sensory needs. The sensory toolbox program is a collaboration with TLC for Kids.

Quiet time

To minimise sensory overload for children with ASD, we have quiet time in the paediatric ward between 1 pm and 3 pm daily. During this time the lights are dimmed, the interactive playroom is switched off and we limit the activity and traffic in the corridors and common areas. Paediatric ward volunteers are available to sit with children, chat to families, read stories or run small activities.

The quiet time is wonderful for all of our children and families – providing an opportunity to rest, recover and regroup. The quiet time has great benefits for our staff too, ensuring concentration for both ward and bedside handovers.

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* Informing an autism-friendly children’s centre at Cabrini*, 2016-17, a study completed by Deakin University and Cabrini Health – thanks to funding from the Cabrini Foundation – with input from Monash University, the Royal Children’s Hospital, and Amaze, Victoria’s peak body for people on the autism spectrum and their families.

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Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are characterised by marked and persistent difficulties in social interaction and communication, as well as restricted and repetitive interests, thoughts and patterns of behaviour.

Identifying the needs of ASD patients and their families

There is increased global recognition that children with ASD have a range of additional needs within a hospital setting, arising from the social, communicative, executive functioning, sensory and behavioural challenges they commonly experience. The healthcare needs of children with ASD are substantial and complex for a number of reasons:

• They are more likely than peers their age to already suffer from clinical anxiety
• They have a higher frequency and duration of admissions due to often having other disorders and conditions, and a tendency for accidents and injuries
• They may have abnormal pain thresholds which are difficult to gauge and manage
• They are highly sensitive to sounds, sights and textures of hospitals and procedures
• They are triggered by unfamiliar or unpredictable situations and places, including waiting rooms, waiting times, and unfamiliar people and spaces
• Anxiety may trigger emotional outbursts, aggression, combativeness or self-injury

In order to provide a hospital environment that is conducive to the additional needs of patients with ASD, Cabrini undertook a research project in 2017.** Our goal was to identify measures which could be introduced into Cabrini to provide an autism-aware environment for children and their families.

Following the research, Cabrini has implemented a number of autism-aware initiatives in the Malvern paediatric ward, and will systematically roll them out to other areas of the hospital, such as theatre, medical imaging and the emergency department.

How is the Cabrini paediatric ward autism-aware?

We respect that the autism-aware initiatives may not be suitable for all children with ASD and that they may also be suited to those children who are not on the autism spectrum.

Below are some examples of our autism-aware initiatives:

Paediatric pre-admission clinic

A paediatric registered nurse will contact all parents/carers of children who have planned admissions. The nurse will not only confirm admission information, allergies and medical history, but will discuss what your child should expect during their stay. Enquiring and understanding about your child’s known coping strategies, communication, stressors etc. will allow us to best prepare for their stay.

With the information we receive in the paediatric pre-admission clinic, we can help to reduce waiting times and modify arrangements for patients with known coping inabilities.

Virtual ward tour

We offer a virtual tour of our paediatric ward on our website: www.cabrini.com.au/paediatrics. It offers children and their families a chance to ‘walk-through’ prior to their scheduled hospital stay. We understand that a change in routine and exposure to novel situations can be extremely stressful for all children, especially those with autism spectrum disorder, so the virtual tour can assist parents and children to prepare.